

## TRANSNATIONAL ZONES OF CONTACT AND CRITICAL LITERACY: EDUCATIONAL USES OF THE IMMIGRATION MUSEUM

Joel Austin Windle<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyses the pedagogical agendas of immigration museums, which have emerged in recent decades as key educational sites for transcultural education. Through discussion of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum (New York), and the Melbourne Immigration Museum (Australia), I identify two pedagogical narratives which seek to produce intercultural empathy through engagement with individual experiences: personalisation and universalisation. I further consider the ways in which critical educators can make use of the online and onsite resources provided by the museums, and possibilities for adaptation and extension of a critical approach to historical accounts of transcultural contact and conflict.

**Key words:** Critical Literacy, racism, anti-racism education

**RESUMO:** Este artigo analisa as propostas pedagógicas dos museus da imigração, que surgiram nas últimas décadas como locais-chaves para a educação transcultural. Através da discussão do Lower East Side Tenement Museum (Nova Iorque) e do Melbourne Immigration Museum (Austrália), identifico duas narrativas pedagógicas que visam a produzir empatia intercultural por meio do engajamento com as experiências individuais: a personalização e a universalização. Além disso, considero as maneiras pelas quais os educadores críticos podem fazer uso dos recursos disponibilizados pelos museus on-line e no local; e as possibilidades de adaptação e extensão de uma abordagem crítica aos relatos históricos de contato e conflito transcultural.

**Palavras-chaves:** Letramento crítico, racismo, educação antirracista

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<sup>1</sup> Licenciatura em Letras pela Universidade de Melbourne; Doutorado em Educação pelas universidades de Melbourne e Bourgogne; Professor da Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto e Pesquisador Associado da Monash University.

## INTRODUCTION

Museums have long been considered “zones of contact” between cultures (THOMAS, 1991; CLIFFORD, 1997). At the same time, museums have been tied to a historical project of nation building which seeks to exclude heterogeneity and hybridity. The present article considers the potential of museums to act as resources for an education which values transcultural and hybrid identities, while acknowledging sources of social conflict imbricated in questions of cultural and linguistic contact. In particular, I consider the strengths and limitations of a historical approach to cultural contact which structures immigration museum exhibitions. My goal is to provide critical educators with an analysis of museums as a pedagogical resource for teaching about cultural and linguistic contact and exchange.

Histories of linguistic and cultural contact and exchange are useful in challenging the hegemonic conception of monolingual and monolingual nation-states. Studying histories of racism and xenophobia in contact between peoples can help to challenge present-day manifestations of prejudice and oppression, a key goal of critical pedagogy (GIROUX e MCLAREN, 1994; KANPOL e MCLAREN, 1995; HICKS, 1999; TRIFONAS, 2003). The growing online presence of immigration museums makes them an increasingly valuable pedagogical resource for students and teachers who have no direct access to museums themselves.

My analysis is based on the educational programs of the Lower East Side Tenement museum (USA) and the Melbourne Immigration Museum (Australia). This choice is based on the fact that both are inner circle English speaking nations (KACHRU, 1992) with a postcolonial history of “melting pot” multiculturalism and official monolingualism (OFFICE OF MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS, 1987; SIMKIN e GAUCI, 1992; KALANTZIS e COPE, 1999; MAY, 1999b; a; NIETO, 1999); but also because they provide a contrast between local and national historical presentation. The Lower East Side Tenement museum is based on the history of a single building and neighbourhood, while the Melbourne Immigration Museum seeks to provide a national overview.

The field of critical literacy provides starting points for this analysis. Within the ambit of critical literacy, transculturalism can be seen as the redefinition of identity construction and language outside of a framework of distinct, rigid and homogeneous cultural units based on nation states (MACDONALD, 2003;

PENNYCOOK, 2007). Lewison et al.'s (LEWISON, FLINT e VAN SLUYS, 2002) synthesis of critical literacy strands identifies a number of relevant connections to a museum-based pedagogy of transculturalism: 1. disrupting the commonplace, 2. Interrogating multiple viewpoints, 3. Focusing on socio-political issues, 4. Taking action and promoting social justice. The use of primary sources and objects in museum education allows for contemplation of the process of historical construction of knowledge (SHOR, 1987) and inclusion/exclusion of various perspectives (LUKE, IYER e DOHERTY, 2010). Immigration, as a contemporary topic of news and opinion, also offers space for work on the media and popular culture (VASQUEZ, 2000) and for consideration of power dynamics in society (BOOZER *et al.*, 1999).

With the goal of overcoming discrimination and prejudice towards migrants, immigration museums present themselves as sites of social action as well as learning. However, there are some important tensions at play in the ways in which historical narratives are framed within such museums. On the one hand, immigration as a phenomenon points to the fluidity and hybridity of social relations and cultural practices; but on the other it fits into a vision of incorporation of new populations into the unity of the nation state. The first section of this paper therefore reviews the contradictory place of museums in relation to transnationalism.

## **IMMIGRATION MUSEUMS AS EDUCATIONAL SITES**

Museums are important pedagogical sites for framing and reframing the relationship between nation, identity, race and culture (HOOPER-GREENHILL, 1999; MACDONALD, 2003; CROWLEY e MATTHEWS, 2006). Immigration museums, by virtue of their focus on movement between national borders, bring a distinctive set of reference points to this task. Such museums have been growing in importance since the 1990s, numbering at least 33 across North America, Europe and Australia (INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF MIGRATION MUSEUMS, 2011). Some, such as Ellis Island in New York, have become mass tourist attractions, while others, such as the Museum of the History of Immigration in Catalonia, reach their widest audience through visits from schools. A common reference point is a commitment to the promotion of tolerance and intercultural understanding, but the history of museums suggests that they bring problematic baggage to this task.

The historical emergence of museums has been studied as part of a state strategy of government and control (BENNETT, 2005). One of the best established themes in museum studies is their ideological role in maintaining social class boundaries and nationalism through a program of moral improvement for the masses (see, for example, (MACDONALD e FYFE, 1996)). Museums, like other monumental projects, attempt to form national identity through shared stories (KRATZ e KARP, 2006; TROFANENKO, 2008). Hage, for example, connects apparently benign narratives of cultural diversity with control over the multicultural other through containment and display, which he terms “zoological multiculturalism” (HAGE, 1998). He argues that the multicultural museum in Australia is a “collection of otherness” (p. 158), over which the implicitly white nation asserts its ownership.

The literature on museums which emphasises the reproduction of hegemonic ideologies understates the diverse forms in which museums appear around the world and contestation between state and museum (DEAN e RIDER, 2005). Some museums have responded to critiques of them as flag bearers of cultural elitism and nationalist ideology and developed explicitly critical and activist agendas (KRIDEL, 2010; LEE, 2010). Museums have also become more responsive how people engage with their displays, giving rise to a considerable literature in visitor studies (HEIN, 1998; HOOPER GREENHILL, 2006). A constructivist analysis of learning in the museum has emerged, along with practices of exhibition which include multiple perspectives and allow for multiple interpretations (HEIN, 1998). There is a trend towards interactive displays which engage the senses and emotions, aided by new technologies (MESSHAM-MUIR, 2005). These developments allow museums to engage their publics with histories of cultural and linguistic contact in innovative and powerful ways.

One progressive element of education programs in immigration museums is represented by anti-racism education. Pedersen et al (2005) identify two broad anti-racism strategies represented in educational campaigns. The first focuses on the individual. It aims to break false beliefs and stereotypes with information, designed either to generate empathy or identify contradictions in beliefs that lead to a logical reassessment. A second strategy is interpersonal in nature, focusing on intergroup contact which can provide alternative information

and norms upon which to base views on race. Building on Allthorp's famous "contact hypothesis", some advocate a need to demonstrate sameness before acknowledging diversity (PETTIGREW, 1998). With both individual and interpersonal strategies, dialogue, rather than simply receiving information (for example, through advertising), is understood to have a more lasting impact. The immigration museums analysed below set up a series of narratives designed to pedagogically explain and combat linguistic, ethnic, cultural and racial prejudice. They involve the personalisation of migrant experiences; the naturalisation and universalisation of both transnational contact and prejudice as a phenomenon that inevitably accompanies it; and the distancing of historical experiences of injustice in intercultural contact.

### **THE PERSONALISATION OF THE TRANSCULTURAL EXPERIENCE**

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum opened in 1988 with tours of restored apartments in what had been cheap rental accommodation for successive waves of migrants beginning in 1994. The museum's website includes lesson plans for classes based on historical artefacts; primary sources such as letters; and oral histories. All of the materials and narratives are based on the lives of the historical occupants of the tenement museum building.

A lesson plan based on objects owned by resident Victoria Confino (LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM, undated), for example, invites students to speculate on the use of various artefacts (photos, record player, religious items), their importance, and what they reveal about the owner. The students must reflect on what their own possessions reveal about themselves, and compare their impressions of Victoria Confino based on her possessions with the description of her provided by the museum. This last activity is designed to reveal the ways in which history constructs individual in different ways, depending on the assumptions of who is writing the history. A final task brings the story of Victoria Confino into a contemporary setting by asking students to create a Facebook page for her. The sequence of lessons is valuable in showing how identity is constructed through various connections to place, language, culture and religion – represented by objects – and how these connections shift with time and can take on different meanings. Underlying it is a desire to personalise transculturalism through the establishment of an empathetic relationship with a historical figure.

Tours at the Tenement Museum similarly reflect this desire to generate a personal relationship with the former residents of the building that houses the museum. Originally aimed at local school groups and tourists, virtual tours now open this experience up to a much wider audience. The virtual tour includes an audio history of the street and tenement building, narrated by the museum's founder. The tour moves through the building with photos; floorplans; captions; and audio recordings. The viewer can click and drag on the photograph of each room for a 360 degree view. In each of the apartments shown in the tour, the story of a family who lived there is told. The German Gumpertz family, for example, mended and sewed garments for German-speaking neighbours. In fact, the entire neighbourhood was at one point known as German Town, and had German street signs and German language newspapers. The story is given a dramatic edge by the disappearance of the family patriarch, Julius Gumpertz – with members of the tour asked to speculate about why he might have vanished. The next apartment in the virtual tour is that of the Rosenthal's – a family who changed from their original family name of Rogarshevsky in the 1910s in order to hide their Eastern European Jewish origins and appear as part of the more established German Jewish immigrant community. This family, like most others who lived in the tenement, worked in the garment trade, and the museum presents a history of industrial relations: accidents, exploitation of labour, strikes, and legal reforms. The dilemmas facing migrants are made even more concrete by an online game in which players take on the role of a migrant in 1916. They must pick an identity, choose a limited number of possessions to take, pass through the Ellis Island immigration checks, seek work, and so on. Finally, the player can write a letter describing their experience and email it to the museum.

The narratives presented in the lessons and tours (virtual and real) work to produce transcultural empathy through emphasis on personal experiences. These experiences are presented through the display of personal possessions, such as letters, the presentation of oral histories, and the stark presentation of compelling push and pull factors. This intimate and emotional encounter is expected to result in empathy for current-day migrants: "Today's visitors can reflect on where they would turn at such times [of need], and to consider those we might help today – and how" (SEITZ e LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM, 2004: 17). A model empathetic response is outlined in an account of a visit to the Tenement Museum by a former resident of the building:

Esposito had grown distant from the experiences of her parents, and of newer immigrant groups. Revisiting 97 Orchard Street as both home and museum helped change that. 'When I came in contact with immigrants coming here now,' Esposito says, 'I would say, "Oh my God, what country am I in? These are all foreign people. What are they all doing here?" Then I realised that these poor immigrants now are doing the same things my parents did. (SEITZ e LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM, 2004: 9).

These narratives follow a regular and uplifting arc of harsh conditions prompting departure, temporary difficulties on arrival, and then social mobility and "fitting in" through business and education – "the migrant made good". Yet the narrative of personalisation, while eliciting sympathy for worthy individuals, allows for the continuation of prejudice against groups, particularly ethnic groups not represented historically in displays. This is a problem recognised by the museum's founder:

I thought that once connected to the depth and breadth of the courage of their immigrant ancestors, contemporary Americans would draw connections between the forebears they admired and the newest arrivals. But it wasn't happening, at least not routinely. (ABRAM, 2007: 63)

Instead, visitors exiting the museum were heard praising the migrants of days gone past while criticising the flaws and deficiencies of current-day Latino immigrants in particular (RUSSELL-CIARDI, 2008). In response, the Tenement Museum established "Kitchen Conversations" in which tour groups would sit down and discuss the museum displays with the mediation of a guide before leaving. This revealed to museum staff the full extent of the challenge they faced as discussions continued to revolve around the flaws present day migrants, such as "refusal" to learn English. However, Abrams suggests that this can be overcome, describing how after some "reasoning" countering the claim that migrants refuse to learn English, "the original gnawing suspicion that immigrants congregate together in foreign-language enclaves in rejection of American ways and values gave way" (ABRAM, 2007: 61).

My own experience of two Kitchen Conversations confirmed a high level of hostility towards Latino and Brazilian migrants who have "taken over" and "act as if they are living in their own countries" – principally through the public use of

Spanish and Portuguese (in shop signs, satellite TV, etc). The children of earlier waves of migration insisted that their parents, unlike current migrants, learned English with devotion and showed commitment to the American dream. Members of the tour who spoke in favour of Latin American migrants did so because they rely on their labour, but complain about decay of the family unit, poor pregnancy, laziness, poor hygiene, and lowered educational aspirations amongst second and third generation migrants of Mexican origin. The racialization of Latinos is clear in a complaint by one participant that people ask her if she speaks Spanish “even though I clearly don’t look Spanish” (i.e. she is light-skinned).

The discussions at the Tenement Museum point to the difficulties of naming and confronting forms of “new racism” (BARKER, 1981). Beginning with disclaimers of racism and repudiations of formal discrimination or biological determinism, new forms of racism focus on cultural and linguistic differences, pathologies and deficiencies, such as welfare dependence, and single parent families (VAN DIJK, 2000). We can observe a semantic construction of oppositions in particular between the worthy and “good” migrants of the past and the unworthy, “bad” migrants of today. The virtuous, nation-building migrants of the past offer a safe counterpoint for critique of current migrants. Race is not explicit in this kind of talk, common with contemporary forms of racism which appeal to “reasonable” appraisals of external reality, practicalities, and a need for national unity (AUGOUSTINOS e EVERY, 2007). While the presence of linguistic racism in visitor reactions to the museum is troublesome, the rich linguistic history on display in the museum provides some counterpoint that can be built on in classroom activities.

The Melbourne Immigration Museum, opened in 1988, presents a similar set of narrative resources. Like the Tenement Museum, the Melbourne Immigration Museum education program relies on biographical accounts, individual stories, letters etc. The diversity, range and time-scale of the accounts makes them the basis for student understandings which search for commonalities, rather than peculiarities. School students are asked to role-play imaginatively a migrant journey in one activity designed to be undertaken during excursions to the museum. Another interactive activity invites visitors to take on the role of Immigration Officer and determine whether various applicants for asylum should be granted a visa. Another class offered by museum staff is described on the website thus:



Hands on workshop – 45mins: Working in small groups students un-pack suitcases filled with objects artefacts and documents revealing the story from a particular wave of immigration. Students identify the major waves of migration to Australia and create a timeline of these waves. (DALTON, CAROLL e FAIRLIE, 2010)

This is a similar method to that adopted by Tenement Museum, but with a more synthetic focus represented by the objective of identifying of waves of migration organised into a timeline. A similar potential for contemporary forms of racism to go unrecognised, and for empathy to be restricted to historical migrant groups (or individuals), extends from the Tenement Museum to the Melbourne Immigration Museum.

#### **THE NARRATIVE OF UNIVERSALISATION**

Whereas the narrative of personalisation speaks to individual attitudes, actions and responses, the narrative of universalisation seeks to relate immigration to the nation state and to a broader national story. The Tenement Museum expresses this vision with the statement that a tenement building is “the ideal place in which to encourage discussions of issues key to our democracy and national identity” (SEITZ e LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM, 2004: 11). The Melbourne Immigration Museum similarly positions itself within a narrative which universalises the immigrant experience within the framework of the nation state.

The museum aims to:

record and interpret the immigration experience of people journeying to Victoria and Australia, and to promote and celebrate our cultural diversity...Visitors to the Immigration Museum are encouraged to understand that there is an immigration story in the life or family history of every non-Indigenous Australian. The exhibitions are based on the elements that are common to all immigration experiences - leavings and journeys, the processes of getting in, arrival and reunions, settlings and impacts. (MUSEUM VICTORIA, 2012)

The formulation of museum aims reveals a narrative strategy complimentary to that of personalisation – that of transcultural contact as a universal and shared experience which in fact serves to define and build the nation.

This trope emphasises continuity, the essential sameness of difficulties and responses across place and time. Racism, for example, is as an inevitable but temporary product of the intercultural encounter (ALLPORT, 1954). The apparent inevitability of these processes, and their ultimate conclusion in incorporation and assimilation of each migrant wave, can make them appear benign. Commonality is established by putting together in displays, as equivalents, stories which differ in almost every way. For example, in the Melbourne museum the personal belongings of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish migrant to Australia are presented together with those of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Sudanese refugee. “Textiles and tales” is an exhibit based around traditions of weaving in various cultures, while “Death: mortality and religious journey” is a display that approaches to coping with death associated with differing faiths. The principle of organising displays not by ethnicity or period but based on practices or objects, effectively escapes from the danger of rigid cultural boundaries but it runs the risk of ignoring the specificities of historical moment, cultural context, and social position which grant a given practice meaning. The Tenement Museum, with its narrower focus on residents of a single building in a single neighbourhood manages to draw in much more of this context in the narratives it constructs around immigrant lives.

### **CRITICAL DIMENSIONS OF ANTI-RACISM EDUCATION AND THE LIMITS OF THE HISTORICAL GAZE**

The general approach of the two museums has been to focus on the individual, and on a vague notion of national incorporation and unity. Within these narratives around transcultural contact, racism may be framed ways which have very different implications for the pedagogical responses - as attitudes and behaviour at the individual level; as institutional practices; as cultural norms; as ideology; or as experience. Gaines and Reed (1995) argue for understanding racism as produced historically through exploitation and the consequences of that exploitation. The narrative strategies of personalisation and universalisation of migration experiences can indeed promote empathy and identification in relation to historical patterns of exploitation. When this occurs they contribute to the objectives of critical literacy (LEWISON, FLINT e VAN SLUYS, 2002) by engaging with alternative perspectives, including those of ordinary lives often invisible to history . They present accounts of joy, sorrow, hardship, oppression, struggle, victory and

discrimination and help students to construct their own visions of these experiences based on artefacts and primary sources. Some of this work focuses on socio-political issues directly. The education pack for students visiting the Melbourne Immigration Museum, for instance, asks them to critically analyse the White Australia immigration policy and the dictation test used to keep out non-English speakers as well as political radicals. Students are asked typical critical literacy questions such as “look for one instance when entry into Australia was made difficult for one or more ethnic groups or individuals (who were they, when did it happen and why do you think it happened?)” (MARLOW, DALTON e HOLLINGWORTH, 2007). In the case of the Tenement Museum, focus on social conditions and collective struggle for improved of housing and labour rights provides a link to historical political action.

At the same time, the historical method of narrative construction presents a number of drawbacks. Firstly, when only historical examples are presented, students can see past migrants as “good” while maintaining a view of current-day migrants as “bad”. Secondly, when a broad sweep of migration is presented, the false impression that transcultural contact inevitably creates temporary problems which soon dissipate can be imparted. Personalising and universalising narratives have not been able to deal well with shifts from historical forms of racism such as legal restrictions, colour racism and biological racism, to contemporary racisms expressed in terms of linguistic and cultural attributes, or represented by residential segregation (GOLDBERG, 2005, p. 96).

The educational programs of both museums, however, extend beyond the historically framed narratives of personalisation and universalisation in some instances. And these efforts are valuable in making up for the shortcomings revealed in particular by the responses of visitors to the Tenement Museum tours. The Tenement Museum has recently extended its online presence to include comics created by current-day migrants, relating their experiences. These contemporary stories provide an important bridge to the present. Unfortunately some of the hyperlinks to resources connected to the stories are no longer active, but the original content remains.

The Melbourne Immigration Museum also invites students, through its education programs, to engage critically with current conditions, policies, and

politics. Questions for student reflection focus precisely on the social and political dimensions of transculturalism. They include:

- Does immigration weaken or strengthen national identity and unity?
- Has Australian society shown itself to be tolerant and accepting of immigrants and ethnic differences?
- Should Australia change its current laws and approaches to refugees and asylum seekers?
- Should ethnic communities preserve their traditions, memories and connections with their homelands? (MARLOW, DALTON e HOLLINGWORTH, 2007)

A second education kit asks students to engage in critical literacy practices through analysis of the media:

Discuss how social and cultural bias may affect media coverage of immigration

- Students write a report on what they have observed of the media's handling of immigration issues and events. Has it been fair? Balanced? One sided? Positive? Negative? Stereotypical?
- Create a noticeboard with examples of both mainstream media and ethnic media. Compare representations of different cultural groups in each. Suggest reasons for these different approaches. (MUSEUM VICTORIA, 2010)

This type of activity is invaluable, and analysis of media and popular constructions of migrants would make a useful addition to the educational objectives of the Tenement Museum. In an age of increasingly mediated expression and multiliteracies (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2009), both museums make efforts to engage with the digital. The task of creating of a Facebook profile within a stand-alone unit of work that teachers can implement without ever visiting the physical space of the Tenement Museum is a good example. The Melbourne Museum, while providing abundant hyperlinks to resources, and providing opportunities for critical reading of the media, nonetheless relies on school groups visiting the physical space of the museum in order to complete the suggested educational activities.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have argued that immigration museums offer valuable resources for transcultural education – including through online educational programs which are accessible across the globe. While the two museums examined envisage a primarily national audience, there is rich scope for adapting making use of their educational materials in other settings.

I have shown how the two narratives that carry the main burden of educational work - those of personalisation and universalisation – provide both entry points to critical literacy and present limitations. In terms of limitations, there is the potential for individual positional aspirations and motivations rather than structural change or collective action emerge as the focus. There can be a general evacuation political and corporate actors, who remain only in residualised and formalised ways that do not allow for the identification of material interests and social struggles. Both museums have begun work to overcome the limitations of a historical framing of racism in particular through work on contemporary migrant experiences, and this extends to analysis of the role of the media in the case of the Melbourne Immigration Museum.

Both immigration museums would benefit from exhibits and educational activities addressing how intercultural encounters are structured by power asymmetries in a more focused way. In educational terms, there is a need for pedagogy of the public domain and of citizenship; for a pedagogy of political process and change involving racism as the work of people and institutions in society (not an invisible hand). We need to consider more closely the foundations and shifting forms of privilege. For example, the prominence of language as a line of racial inclusion and exclusion in the discussions emerging from the Tenement Museum conversations suggest the need to focus more sharply on this issue. A comparative approach would be productive here, as exclusion on the basis of language is well represented in the Melbourne Immigration Museum. Teachers also need to look to the communities of their student populations in order to offer perspectives for social action.

Finally, the conditions of productive dialogue merit further investigation and reworking. In their attempt to open up anti-racist pedagogy; de Souza and Andreotti propose a useful conceptual framework consisting of “learning to unlearn” (reflection on one’s own position and perspective); “learning to listen”

(recognising and engaging with difference) and “learning to learn” (how to receive new perspectives; accepting discomfort in this process). As zones of transnational and transcultural contact, immigration museums are perfect locations for such dialogue to be initiated, but not in isolation. They must be connected to other sites of social action – community associations, unions, and schools themselves. Engagement with museums must also shift from the perspective of the ‘visitor’ to that of the learner and social agent. This paper sits as an invitation to teachers and museum workers to take up the challenge of contributing to this shift.

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