

VISITOR EMOTION, AFFECT AND REGISTERS OF ENGAGEMENT AT MUSEUMS AND HERITAGE SITES

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Keywords: heritage, emotion, museums, heritage tourism

Introduction

Why do people visit museums and heritage sites? This is on the surface a relatively simple question, and is addressed in academic discussion, policy and practice as such. Responses have traditionally been framed by two core assumptions: people come to either learn and/or to recreate as tourists. Both assumptions tend to define visitors as passive consumers of curatorial or interpretative messages, and tend to foreclose the possibility that other things may be occurring during individual and collective visits to such places. Work that I have been doing since 2004 has aimed to question these assumptions and explore what the visit not only means to visitors, but to identify the wider cultural, political and social work that visiting does.

My arguments are predicated on the idea that heritage is a cultural process that individuals and societies engage in to negotiate not only the meaning of the past, but the ways in which the past is used to legitimize or to remake cultural and political values and narratives. Museum collections, heritage sites or other items and places normally identified as heritage are, I assert, not in and of themselves heritage, but rather cultural tools that are utilised in an active performance of heritage creation in which remembering and memory making occurs. Heritage is a performance intimately tied up with the legitimation of identity, belonging and sense of place, but it is a negotiated process or performance in which heritage meanings or heritage making are constantly made and remade for the needs of the present. These negotiations often occur at or around the practices of management and curation, decisions on what to collect, list or define as heritage, what to save and what to destroy and so on. However, these performances also occur individually and collectively through the visitation of particular places or sites. This definition also rejects the boundary often drawn between museums and heritage sites, and argues that both are theatres of memory, as well as sites of historical consciousness and heritage making. I also argue that the performances that curators and heritage managers engage in are not necessarily the performances with which visitors engage.

One of the key issues emerging from the data is that heritage sites and museums are places where people go to feel, to be emotional. Understanding the emotional nature of visiting has not only revealed that the learning/recreational paradigms of understanding visiting is far too limited, but has also shown that museums and heritage sites are used in many different ways and for many different purposes by visitors.

Understanding the emotional content of the visit reveals the complex ways in which visitors react to curatorial messages. This is because it is this ability to feel, particularly when dealing with contentious or dissonant issues, that is often central to the development of critical and progressive insights into the past and its meanings for the present. Conversely, however, emotionally flat responses may also close down critical engagement and reinforce understandings of and commitments to consensus views of history. Thus, my overall aim is to attempt to untangle these affective responses and to explore how they impede or facilitate visitor engagement, and the role they play in the framing the moments of heritage and meaning making in which visitors engage.

The project over the last four years has been concerned with interviewing visitors to heritage sites and museums in Australia and the US and it builds on several similar projects commenced in 2004 and 2007 in England (Smith 2006, 2010). The combined database consists of just under 4,500 visitor interviews at 45 different sites or exhibitions. Just over 2000 interviews have been collected in Australia and the US over the last 4 years.

Methodology

The interviews consist of a number of demographic questions to determine, among other measures, age, gender, occupation and distance travelled. These are followed by a core of 12 open-ended questions, although depending on the site or museum in question, further questions are often added. Responses to the open-ended questions were recorded with the permission of the interviewee. Interviews were generally administered just before people exited the museum or site, with the intention of undertaking one-to-one interviews, although group interviews were taken where couples, family groups or visitor groups desire to be interviewed collectively. All interviews were transcribed and read through to identify themes. Each question was then coded according to the themes that had emerged in the read through. These codes were used to derive descriptive statistics using SPSS and cross tabulations were undertaken against the demographic variables.

Findings

There are a range of themes that emerge from the data and a number of different types of heritage performances that visitors engage in. There are two overall key issues, however, that I want to draw to your attention and then I will look at some of the specific performances. The first issue is the idea of registers of engagement. It is a prosaic observation that individuals will engage differently with a particular aspect of history and that different sites may engender varying levels of engagement. However, measuring different levels of engagement reveals the limitations of much of the heritage and museum interpretation literature, which draws on educational studies that argue deep engagement is more significant than shallow engagement. Some visitor engagement can be quite shallow, banal even, but nonetheless such engagement does important cultural and political work, while some deep engagement can generate a lot of emotional feeling, but does not necessarily go far in developing critical insight for the visitor. For example, here is a visitor deeply engaged with an exhibition about Star Spangled Banner at the Smithsonian National History Museum:

Interviewer: Does an exhibition like this have meaning for contemporary America?

Daughter: I think so. I think it creates a link to the reason we became a country. [Interviewee becomes so emotion she excuses herself and disappears sobbing]

Mother: I think it has meaning for the younger generations [...] Just supports my strength for our country even more. The patriotism.
(F30 (daughter), 18-24, student; F31 (mother) 45-54, teacher, Caucasian American)

This deep emotional engagement can, as much as banal or shallow engagement, rehearse what Gramsci defines as 'common sense' narratives and readings of the past and present. Deep and shallow visitor engagement can also be either conservative/reactionary or liberal/progressive, however, understanding registers of engagement is important for understanding both the emotional, imaginative and intellectual investments that visitors may make in their visits, the ways emotions and critical insight interact, and the meanings that are subsequently rehearsed or rejected and reconstructed during visits.

The second key issue is that of 'reinforcement'. The terms reinforcement, confirmation or other synonyms are not used in the interview schedule. However, these terms commonly occur when people talk about the meaning of the visit or the messages they take away from their visit. For the vast majority of those interviewed, across all genre of site types and all three countries, noted that the visit is about reinforcing not only what they already know, but more importantly, what they already feel and believe, for example:

Each time we come to a place like this it just reinforces what I've seen and just makes me feel good to be an Australian. [...] I don't think I'll take anything new um [away]...at all, but it's [my knowledge and views have] been reinforced. Reinforcement is really what I take away.
(LR9 male, 55-64, manager, Australian)

No not really, my knowledge and experiences were relatively similar to this before [I visited] so I think it's just reinforced my ideas on it already.
(NMA033: male, 25-34, teacher, Anglo-Saxon-Australian)

It just reinforces my inner feelings that for people to come to another land, escaping religious persecution there, and then to do what they did here is pretty arrogant because they don't understand another culture. It makes me ashamed.
(PM72: female, 55-64, real estate agent, Italian-American)

It reinforces, it makes me appreciate and feel proud of my country.
(EI81: female, 35-44, nurse, American)

The idea that such visits should be a learning or educational experience was hardly ever organically raised by visitors. When it was, it tended to be in relation to children or groups of people other than that to which the speaker belonged, or as something that they felt they should be doing, even if they acknowledged that actually they were not. This is not to say learning was not important for some visitors, but it was not on the

whole what people saw themselves doing, rather they were affirming. As this speaker shows, what was being affirmed was often a sense of emotional commitment to particular narratives and political or social values:

I don't go to museums for education, I can read material on the internet and in books, I come for emotional reasons. Coming for education makes no sense.
(NCRM61: male, 55-64, retired health care, African American)

I want to look at some of the types and ranges of performances that visitors engage in to do this I want to explore one quite complex visitor response to the question: 'Are there any messages about the heritage or history of America that you take away from this museum?' The speaker is a woman visiting the Civil Rights Museum, in Memphis, USA with her 12-year-old son; she is a postal worker, who identified herself as Black American:

It really is, just the history of it is so, to know – you know, [...]. And me being a union president and things, it puts me on focus. And being a parent, a parent of young kids, and a young parent, it just puts me on focus as to my kids. When I first brought my youngest son here, he'll be 13 next month, and we walked through what the Klu Klux Klan clothes were, I think he may have been about 4. And when we came through my first thought was, 'What are white people doing in their head because they know what they did to us?' I mean, just honestly. And I'm looking around 'cos I'm astonished at that, and then, when my son walked upon the Klu Klux Klan he said, out loud, as kids do, 'Momma, who pyjamas are those?' and everybody turned and looked at me, and I was like, 'Those aren't pyjamas.' I said, 'I'll tell you about them', and you know they're waiting for my answer, so we keep going and I'm like reading this stuff to him, saying, 'And this is what they did to black people and this is what...' and he bust out again, 'Who's black, mama?' And I said, 'Oh my God', and I looked at him, and you know I saw this guy watching and I'm like [pause] 'You're black'. And he was like, 'No I'm not. I'm not black. I'm yellow.' And I said, 'Okay', and I remember what my pastor said: 'You don't know you're poor until you're told you're poor. You don't know you're black until you're told you're black.' He never knew he was black. So, you know, I'm like, Wow. So, when I bring him here he learns more, and we come every year 'cos I have family down here.

This speaker touches on a range of issues also raised by other speakers. Firstly, she is using the museum to remember and commemorate her own experiences in the civil rights movement, and with this remembering comes a reinforcement of her political and social values. This was a strong theme in many visitors' visits to almost all genres of heritage site and museum examined in this study, but was particularly strong at museums of labour, immigration, Indigenous histories and civil rights. At sites or exhibitions that were seen to represent consensus national narratives what was remembered was often less personal, but no less strongly held emotional commitments to master narratives of nation and citizenship. These narratives were frequently maintained and reinforced even in contexts where the curatorial message aimed at destabilising and challenging these narratives.

To go back to the speaker: This is her and her younger son's fourth visit to the museum, and she is using this and previous visits to pass on familial history and political values to her son. The ways in which museums were used as arenas for socialisation and acculturation was another significant finding. Museums and heritage sites were used as cultural tools in the passing on of familial memory, knowledge and values. In some instances, the performance of visiting and where you visited was also something parents taught their children – for instance, visiting presidential houses or stately homes in all three countries was something people from a particular ethnic and socio-economic background did and were engaged in passing on to their children. The visit itself was seen as a statement of belonging to a particular ethnic and class group. National Museums and heritage sites were also used by recent immigrants to all three countries to acculturate themselves into their new national identity.

The speaker here, however, is expressing discomfort at the presence of white visitors at the museum. In certain genres of museum or site in all three countries there was often a reiteration that people liked to visit places where they would see people like themselves. In most cases this was often expressed by politically dominant groups such as Anglo Australians, white British or Caucasian Americans – being in places with people like yourself was a statement or performance of identity. However, the reasons the speaker at the Civil Rights Museum is expressing distress at the presence of people unlike herself is more complex and tied to the politics of recognition. I draw on Nancy Fraser (2000) and Iris Young (2000) to define the politics of recognition as part of pragmatic negotiations over not just social and cultural identity but the distribution of resources. Heritage, moreover, is implicated in the way claims for recognition are made and legitimized or delegitimized. There are a range of heritage performances that occur across all genres of museum or heritage site that are linked to either recognition or misrecognition. Some visitors talk explicitly about their visit to heritage sites that are not their own as a statement or act of recognition. Other visitors assert self-respect and see their visit to sites of their own heritage as an assertion or claim for recognition. Sometimes visitors from hegemonic groups engage explicitly in recognition of themselves as the inheritors of privilege, and in varying ways use their visit to certain sites to negotiate what that may mean both for themselves and other members of their society. Others use museum displays as a social barometer to assess the extent to which wider society is offering recognition or misrecognition of themselves.

Our speaker here, however, is engaged in a form of self-recognition. To understand her discomfort, we need to appreciate that she is passing on social and familial memories of not just discrimination, but of the civil rights movement's continuing struggles to overcome prejudice to her son, and thus creating self-recognition of his place in US society. As Judith Butler notes one of the problematic aspects of recognition is that it can 'inscribe injury into identity and makes that a presupposition of political self-representation' and, as she goes on to warn, injury cannot then 'be recast as an oppression to be overcome' (Butler and Anthanasiou 2013: 87). The mother speaking here is reacting against this possibility; she is uncomfortable about the presence of whites in the museum because of the opportunity of misrecognition of self that their presence presents for her son. She does not want established ideas of recognition of African Americans to prevail; she does not want injury to be part of his self-recognition. As she noted earlier in the interview, being at the museum made her

'feel good to know that there was a history for us to move forward' from (NCRM53). In effect, she is using this museum to offer self-recognition as a point from which to continue struggles for equity. However, the more public arena of the museum opens up, for her at least, greater risks of misrecognition. One of the enduring ideas about museums is that they are safe places to explore complex topics. For some, as this speaker illustrates, museums are simply not safe.

They can also be unsafe places for people who are confronted with a curatorial message that they find cognitively dissonant, that challenges their treasured entrance narrative. What this research is also illustrating is the way such visitors can use emotional responses to render an unsafe or challenging museum or heritage site safe and unchallenging. The research is revealing a range of strategies that visitors use to disengage with the unsafe and thus re-assert both their entrance narrative and their sense of self-identity. However, the research is also identifying the strategies that some visitors use to embrace the unsafe and work with the challenges museum staff may offer to reassess their sense of self and the narratives they held.

Conclusion

In this short paper, I can only touch on some of the themes coming out of this research. However, by way of conclusion I want to stress that understanding the emotional aspect of visitor interactions with heritage is crucial, and I draw your attention to one last interview that reveals some of this emotional complexity. During all the interviews I have done, I have had many people break down and cry or become speechless with emotions too complex to voice. Through all that, there was one interview that reduced me to the same state.

It was July 5 2012, the day following American Independence Day, and it was a blistering hot day in New York City and I was standing on the forecourt of Ellis Island watching visitors come and go to the museum. I watched as an elderly woman, and what I assumed was her daughter, enter the museum to exit it a short time later. The elderly woman sat on one of the benches overlooking the Hudson River, while her daughter returned to the museum. I approached the older woman and she agreed to be interviewed. She told me she was 97 and that she had lived in NYC all her life, but this was her very first visit to Ellis Island. She was not much interested in the museum displays she explained; rather she had chosen to sit looking out at the water because she was 'waiting for her father'. She went on to quickly state that I was not to think she was crazy or anything, but that her father had passed through Ellis Island in 1901, she had loved and respected her father very much and Ellis Island had been a very important site for him. She had never been to the island, but now, despite the heat, thought it was time to come to, as she repeated, to 'wait for her father'.

Heritage sites and museums displaying history and culture are used in *many* different ways by visitors. Understanding the ways in which people use and engage with sites of heritage allows a greater understanding not only of the ways in which history and the past are understood, but more importantly how the past is actively used in the present by individuals. This use may range from the negotiation of contemporary social and

political issues, aspects of personal, ethnic or national identity, and most importantly, the mediation of past and contemporary experiences that underpin ideas of identity.

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