

PATRIMONIO CULTURAL:

Ética, capacidades
y sostenibilidad

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Immigration museums: between migratory phenomenon, memory, heritage and identity

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Resumen

Los sitios públicos albergan cada vez más los recuerdos de los migrantes en su diversidad y especificidad, haciendo versiones audibles y visibles del pasado que habían sido ocluidos o simplemente descuidados. Los museos creen cada vez más que se empodera a los inmigrantes recordando y redimiendo sus recuerdos, que a menudo han estado ausentes de las narrativas nacionales. La transformación de antiguas instalaciones que recibían y alojaban a inmigrantes – como Ellis Island en Nueva York – en sitios que reviven sus historias muestra una transformación en las actitudes hacia la inmigración, que ha cambiado el estatus de la “diáspora” y ha dado visibilidad a una gama de identidades culturales. Cambiar la relación de los migrantes con su identidad: de memorias olvidadas y transitorias al reconocimiento y empoderamiento. La integración de la historia de la migración sigue siendo un desafío dentro de los espacios y narrativas de los museos, aunque es una característica cada vez más notable del panorama museístico internacional. Por lo tanto, surgen muchas preguntas como: ¿Qué es el patrimonio migratorio? ¿Cómo exhibir la inmigración? ¿Los intentos de representar a los inmigrantes reflejan un paradigma nacional?

Palabras clave

Museología; inmigración; representación; nacional; identidad.

Abstract

Public sites increasingly harbor the memories of migrants in their diversity and specificity, making audible and visible versions of the past that had been occluded or simply neglected. Museums increasingly believe that you empower immigrants by remembering and redeeming their memories, which have often been absent from national narratives. The transformation of old facilities that used to receive and accommodate immigrants – such as *Ellis Island in New York* – into sites that revive their histories shows a transformation in attitudes towards immigration, which has changed the status of “diaspora” and has given visibility to a range of cultural identities. Changing migrants’ relationship with their identity: from overseen and transitory memories to recognition and empowerment. The integration of migration history continues to be a challenge within museum spaces and narratives even though it is an increasingly notable feature of the international museum landscape. Thus, it raises a lot of questions such as: What is Migration heritage? How to exhibit immigration? Do attempts at representing migrants mirror a national paradigm?

Keywords

Museology; immigration; representation; national; identity.

1. Cultural heritage and museums today

Today we see the museology field facing transformations to better translate into museums and exhibitions the deep changes in our contemporary societies. Thus museums are increasingly becoming places for discussion of several central themes of our contemporary world, such as global warming and the question of social justice and equity.

The upheaval of our perceptions and understanding of the world in the current context of pressing globalization, makes museum professionals seek a real change in paradigms when it comes to collecting and exposing other narratives that were before overlooked or purposely forgotten.

In the 19th century, museums, despite their declared universalism, had in fact imposed themselves as instruments of the nation-state, with a civilizing and educating mission put at the service of national history (past and future). Today, when this ideological constellation has been deeply questioned and the very idea of the nation-state has given way to the difficult problem of the cohabitation of disparate communities and cultures, the role of museums must be radically reformulated.

Moreover, this question does not only concern museums, but more broadly, statues and public monuments: in other words any form of celebratory nationalism that hinders the multicultural and plural narratives that comes with the inclusion of these long “overlooked” narratives from what are considered minority groups (indigenous narratives, black narratives, women narratives,...etc).

These typical expressions of 19th and 20th century nationalism, have recently been the target of controversies no less violent than those involving museums, even of destruction which has become symbols of the fight against inequalities and the various forms of “supremacy”: white, colonialist or imperialist.

The new transformative stories adopted by several new museums that museums and monuments must adopt to face change and reinvent themselves, or rather to invent a different way of exhibiting the world.

It is now a question of transforming its syntax, in other words, the presentation of objects in the room, their relationships in time and space, the contexts in which they are exhibited, and the complex and multiple links that are let glimpse. For museums, such a change in syntax, which would entail the

eventual reorganization of collections and administrations, means a most arduous task, both intellectually and from the point of view of museum practices.

This change of gaze (in museology) encourages us to consider a new method, dictated by certain fundamental requirements: to get rid of Eurocentrism, to decenter the gaze from the western world, to change axis of reflection and to question the points of view from which we look at works of art, for example, and various museum collections in the different fields of scientific knowledge (ethnography, history, physics,...etc).

Awareness of the need for this opening of the world of museums (and of these contradictions) towards a new way of approaching collections, thus making it possible to defuse stereotypes, unequivocal interpretations or models of thought, and this, in order to favor plural readings, even if they remain partial and contradictory.

2. Migration Museums as institutions that exhibit plural narratives

The category of history and society museums dealing with the theme of immigration dates back some forty years. Their projects appeared at the end of the 1970s and 1980s and therefore constitute a recent category of museums which must be analyzed for their relevance in the current context.

Thanks to the contribution of the New Museology, which appeared in specialized circles in the 1980s, a movement of protest and renovation has been formed in the museum environment which aims to promote the contribution of the human and social sciences as well as to renew the traditional modes of relationship between museum establishments and the public. The main objective is therefore to set up a renewal of museum institutions as an instrument of participatory development at the service of society. The communities concerned are thus often placed at the very heart of the mission of these institutions, by developing new practices for creating exhibitions centered on a participatory and polyphonic process.

The museum object becomes a support for stories and community memories: ethnographic objects, contemporary creation or even intangible cultural heritage (traditional dances, gastronomy, songs among others) combine to offer the visitor a more integral vision of the subject treated.

Their interdisciplinary nature makes it possible to very clearly show the plural aspect of immigration and the need to analyze this phenomenon from a multidisciplinary perspective, thus combining history, anthropology and art history (thanks to the contribution of contemporary art)¹. It is therefore both the nature of the questions posed by these museums in their permanent exhibitions and the sequence of different levels of interdisciplinary analysis that guide the process of representing the “other immigrant” with the aim of creating a more inclusive narrative.

As memorial institutions, museums play a major role in the construction of identity. Representations of the past and local cultural heritage are essential for the development of national or regional identity. In particular as the transformation of old facilities which welcomed immigrants, for example at Ellis Island, in New York, in memorial sites which stage their stories.

As a result of this patrimonialization of immigrants’ memories, a new discourse on immigration and identity is taking place: memories that are often forgotten, sometimes intentionally forgotten, find their place in museums and make it possible to create a narrative on immigration based on personal accounts.

However, the heritage of the history of immigration remains a challenge in the international museum landscape.² Thus, several questions arise: What is the heritage of immigration? How to expose immigration? Do attempts

1. Contemporary art appears more and more in museums and/or exhibitions dedicated to the theme of migration. Works of contemporary art are a medium which makes it possible to fill in certain sensitive points of migratory themes. The subjectivity and sensitivity brought by the artistic gaze allows another interpretation of the discourse conveyed by the exhibitions by opening the possibility of an interpretation at a more subjective level.

2. This article is based on my thesis defended in December 2020 entitled: Heritage and immigration - Ellis Island Immigration Museum, *Museu da Imigração* and *Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration*: the role of the museum as a mediator in the construction of identity (1980-2020). My doctoral research focused on the heritage of immigration and, in particular, the creation of museums on the history of immigration. By whom, how and for whom is this heritage of immigration constituted? By whom, how and for whom is this past/present written and negotiated today? It proposes to analyze the issues by which this past history and its epistemological, economic and social “heritage” is transformed into heritage. Does this patrimony bear the imprint of a conflicting past which sometimes tends to freeze in a simplistic, even binary, reading of History?

to represent immigrants reflect a national paradigm³? How were the collections kept in museums dedicated to the history of immigration created? Are the contemporary forms of rewriting, renegotiation and reappropriation of objects found in “places of memory” (American and Brazilian cases)⁴ the basis of these collections?

The legitimacy of the object is thus, in itself, called into question: as Gérard Noiriel clearly shows in his book “State, nation and immigration” (NOIRIEL 2001), the history of immigration in France remains a delicate subject, even “an illegitimate object”, and which encounters obstacles and methodological problems: a real “fallow story” (NOIRIEL 2001).

The subject of this article is therefore, to a certain extent, at the crossroads of two important contemporary debates: on the one hand, the study of migrations, which has recently been interested in the cultural dimension of migratory phenomena, and another, the study of museum institutions which questions the influence of heritage institutions in the enhancement of the memories and heritage of immigration.

But the idea is to think not only about heritage, but rather how to exhibit immigration and put it in the museum. How to talk about immigration and present it during an exhibition? Since immigration museums do not have a monopoly on the representation of immigration and many researchers even argue that the history of immigration should be present in city history museums or in museums in national history. For them, the creation of a museum dedicated to the history of immigration would be seen as a failure: a lack of integration of the history of immigrants into the national history of the country.

In this article, the objective is to open the discussion on the points of convergence and the difficulties encountered when creating exhibitions on themes related to immigration. It is centered on our doctoral research, focused on the creation of discourses and representations of immigration,

3. Theoretical model of thought that guides scientific research and reflection in the creation of exhibits on the national history of a country.

4. During my doctoral research, I visited several museums dedicated to the history of immigration which chose as sites “places of memory” of immigration (ports, places of sorting and reception of new immigrants) but the Ellis Island Immigration Museum and the *Museu da Imigração* had in common this desire to create the museum collection from the remains found in the buildings that had served as an official reception service for immigrants for decades.

thus opening the dialogue on the challenges and possibilities that these museums and these exhibitions, in short this heritage, offer to research today.⁵

2.1. The museum as an actor in the construction of the social memory of immigration: national narratives in Europe and America

To some extent, from old Europe to the American continent, most national museums were founded on the idea of valuing the images and symbols that constitute the national identity of each country. These “national imaginaries” (ANDERSON 2002, p. 192) developed to stimulate a patriotic consciousness, thus strengthening national cohesion.

Is the construction of identity and heritage on the American continent different from that in Europe⁶?

The heritage “strategy” differs between the “new world” and “the old continent”. The differences in the representation of the “self” in museums vary on the American and European continent according to the origin myths of each country.

In the United States and Brazil, museum institutions have developed in a different approach than that found in the European process of creating national heritages. If in Europe, the collections are rather attached to the concept of “masterpiece”, already on the American continent they are constituted from everyday objects, highlighted thanks to their memorial value. (BERGERON & FERREY 2013) Museums dedicated to national history and local culture (folklore museums) have therefore developed more widely on the American continent, while in Europe, these are the art museums which have developed more strongly. At a time when decolonization in museums, mainly of ethnology and society, but also in art museums, is on the agenda,

5. Whether it is a permanent exhibition in a museum dedicated to the history of immigration or a temporary exhibition, in a specific city or country, exchanges between researchers, exhibition curators and artists offer a multitude of practices and processes. , from a multidisciplinary perspective of content creation on immigration.

6. I was able to develop this theme in more depth in the second chapter of my thesis dedicated to the contextualization of the creation of heritage institutions in Europe and on the American continent. Always with a focus on the three nation-states studied: France, the United States and Brazil.

discussions on the history of immigration and colonial history are essential.

In these two continents, the history of immigration has been musealised, promoting, a priori, stories of “otherness” challenging discourses based on a single and homogeneous identity. However, in the Americas, museographic approaches remain similar and comparable since the idea of a “melting pot” of cultures and ethnicities is present in the national identity imagination. (SOHAT & STAM 2012)

How can the national heritage cohabit with an immigrant or, in other words, foreign heritage? How can images, symbols and masterpieces of immigrant cultures be representative of the host nation? Wouldn't that be a challenge to the very definition of a nation?⁷

The approaches adopted thus depend on national narratives and cultural models. Europe is distinguished from the New World by a belated and hesitant recognition of the place of immigration in its official history, even if European countries also experience a very multicultural social reality. Most of the initiatives are carried out by local museums or by cultural institutions already mobilised on intercultural issues. Large museum institutions coexist with small regional museums or even community initiatives that present exhibitions on the contribution of cultures from immigration to national culture.

The representation of otherness in these museums remains one of the key points to be deconstructed and reformulated in order to overcome common stereotypes about all those who are considered foreigners. “Research on migrations has diversified considerably in recent years by applying itself to deconstructing the frozen image that we have of migrants, and moreover of immigrants, a tenacious term that too often imprisons the experiences of those who are designated by this expression. (GROSFOGUEL, LE BOT & POLI 2011, p. 5).

However, it would seem that museums and exhibitions devoted to the history of immigration remain, in most cases, prisoners of a certain

7. Do they challenge the aesthetic canons of the “dominant white nation”? Does the contribution of these institutions to the contemporary debate on human migration bring us new perspectives for the future? Or, then, does the representation of migrations remain frozen by a certain “museographic nationalism”?

museographic nationalism. “Developed in the light of the construction of the national narrative, inscribed in the perspective of national integration, they celebrate success and sometimes evoke its difficulties or failures. This is the case with the most famous of them, the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York. (GROSGUÉL, LE BOT & POLI 2011, p. 6) Museums created from a place of memory, in New York and São Paulo, for example, take advantage of a setting that attracts visitors by their monumentality but also by their staging, thus promoting the migrant experience.⁸

Even if the social landscape of these countries makes migration common, political and social history obliges them to deal with immigration issues with great care, in order to facilitate transmission between generations as well as encounters between migrants and the host populations, through the telling of their personal history. Moreover, the overvalued myth of the melting pot and racial democracy hides problematic racial and social tensions that are reflected in the choice to “celebrate” in these museums rather “white” and European immigration.⁹

Thus, we could say that at the very heart of these permanent exhibitions supposed to represent the memory of immigrants, reigns the deepest silence on the reality of immigration. As in many other nations of the American continent, “white” European colonization was put forward to the detriment of the reality of the “ethnic cleansing” of the indigenous populations, during the process of colonization of these countries, and of an interbreeding problem of populations leading to symbolic and socio-economic divisions in these societies.¹⁰

8. We use the English term here because this sensory and “experiential” approach during a heritage visit is very present in English-speaking museology.

9. In the first part of my thesis (3 chapters), I developed a transnational analysis of the historiography of immigration in relation to the development of a heritage dedicated to immigration. I focused the discussion mainly on the transatlantic axis, favoring a comparative analysis between the American continent (Brazil and the United States) and Europe (France).

10. In another sense, however, the various geopolitical positions mask a historical substrate shared by the three nation-states where the museums studied in my thesis are located, namely their colonizing relationship to indigenous peoples; their common shaping by the triangular slave trade; and their common pattern of pursuit of racial hegemony. Thus, the three nation-states represent a distinct conjuncture for heritage constructions within intercolonial and intercultural configurations.

According to Michel Foucault (1970), discourse would be controlled by the rules of exclusion. As a result, the exclusion of “non-white” and “non-European” populations is already an indication of the socio-economic situation of these populations. From which domains do the structuring discourses of these museums fall: politics, history, economics, sociology, ethnography, art history, contemporary art or other?

Furthermore, another important point to address when talking about museums of society and immigration, in particular, is to address the question of the other and to recognize the discourse on the representation of other cultures in these institutions. As immigration museums therefore fall not only into the category of history museums, but also of society museums, they would thus be susceptible to transformations and questions related to the representations of the other. Consequently, would immigration museums be a space for praising the self or the other? How to talk about cultural identity in these museums? What are the challenges and issues of immigration museums, supposed to represent the “other” cultures that are part of the “national us”, starting from the principle that museums of society are engaged in the “development” of other cultures?

Paradoxically, these museums end up staging “the West” rather than their ostensible subjects. To a certain extent, immigration museums would reinforce the national identity “the self” and the nationalist grassroots discourse.

As a result, we could say that at the heart of migrant memory and migrant experience, presented in the museums studied, presented in the museums studied during my PhD thesis reigns the deepest silence on the history of immigration. “Having non-European ancestors seems to disqualify you for migrant status, beyond the national border regime. According to this logic, an “immigrant” is, by definition, a “citizen” of the melting pot destined for progress. On the other hand, any indigenous lineage pushes the Latin American migrant out of citizenship symbolic, sending him back to the silent impasse of the earth. (BLICKSTEIN 2011, p. 96-106) We can thus question the substance of the discourse of these immigration museums on the American continent, which do not really touch on central questions such as the memory of slavery and the memory of indigenous populations. The dissociation of the history of immigration from the history of colonization, for example, creates invisible barriers that end up being revealed in the difficulty of fostering an inclusive discourse.

The French migration museum remains a particular project since it is not in direct harmony with the Palais de la Porte Dorée, there is even a kind of friction between the building and the museum discourse. According to Luc Gruson, former director of the museum: “Furthermore, the choice of the Palais de la Porte Dorée was debated and will continue to be debated, because it forces us to confront the contradictions of European history. The “greatest France” placed at the center of the world in the frescoes of the Palais des colonies in 1931 must admit today that it is one nation among others, that its relationship to the world has changed. It is in this context, which can be called post-colonial, that the CNHI invites visitors to rethink otherness and the processes of migration and identity. (GRUSON 2011, p. 12-21).

Nevertheless, the debate on the colonial heritage of the Palais de la Porte Dorée only very superficially or ostensibly approached by an exhibition on the history of the Palace from 1930 to the present day, located on the second floor of the Palais from 2014 to 2020. This “interpretation space”¹¹ of the site was intended to explain to visitors the importance of the history of the building which therefore houses the Musée national de l’histoire de l’immigration.

But no link was made between the permanent exhibition *Repères* and this space of interpretation of the lieu de mémoire, which the Palais de la Porte Dorée represents for French colonial history. Instead of including a reflection on French identity, what France is today and what it was, in order to overcome ethnocentric (even Eurocentric) discourses, the museum presented an exhibition that highlighted rather the ‘highlights’ of an immigrant’s journey to integrate into French society.

In 2008, the first temporary exhibition produced by the museum, “1931, Foreigners at the time of the Colonial Exhibition”¹², one of whose curators was Jacques Hainard¹³, clearly highlighted the history of the Palace, the Co-

11. This exhibition was presented to the public on the second floor of the Palais de la Porte Dorée from 2014. There will be no significant change in this contextualization of the place hosted by the museum until the 2020 closing date. the permanent exhibition *Repères* and the *Galerie des Dons*.

12. The exhibition was presented to the public from May 6 to October 5, 2008. For more information, consult the museum’s website, available at: <https://www.histoire-immigration.fr/> (accessed March 18 2022).

13. Jacques Hainard is director of the Geneva Museum of Ethnography (MEG), curator of the Neuchâtel Museum of Ethnography (MEN) from October 1980 to January 2006, lecturer in

lonial exhibition, supposed to present the “glory” of the French colonial Empire, and the links between immigration and colonization.¹⁴

During the occupation of the city, in 2009, by undocumented migrants, immigrants became actors in direct relation with the museum space, thus revealing the risk of the personification of immigrants “at the risk of exoticism”. (GRUSON 2011, p. 12-21) It is necessary, mainly in the French case, to go beyond colonial imaginations and to thwart the simulacra in otherness. According to the director of the museum at the time, Luc Gruson: “Of course, this occupation of almost four months deeply disturbed the Cité team: in addition to the tensions inherent in this kind of situation, it is obvious that the irruption of the history of immigration in the making has caused a shock in an institution trying at the same time to get out of the polemics of the news. More deeply, the occupation made it clear that the history of immigration told by undocumented Malians was not a repetition of that of the migrants of the post-war boom years, questioning the museum in return on the implicit choices of its permanent journey. (GRUSON 2011, p. 12-21).

Thus, this example shows us the symbolic importance of the place in the national imagination (former Colonial Museum) but which is also transformed into a space of contemporary claim of visibility of undocumented immigrants. This legitimate episode of a in a certain way the space of the museum as a place of social action where it becomes a dynamic actor in the construction of the social memory of immigration. It is therefore a place of very strong politicization where the symbolic imagination is present. On the other hand, for the media this “intervention” of the harsh reality of undocumented migrants in the face of French migration policy will

ethnomuseography at the Institute of Ethnology of the University of Neuchâtel from October 1980 to September 2006. He was the general curator of the exhibition “1931, Foreigners at the time of the Colonial Exhibition”.

14. “Is it, therefore, possible to weave a link between these two historical phenomena? Above all, evoking immigration in the early 1930s through the Colonial Exhibition appears eminently problematic: very quickly, the debate can focus on the assimilation of the history of immigration to a subset of history of colonization. [...] Precisely, the challenge was to demolish the stereotypes inherited from the colonial and postcolonial period by questioning the relationship between immigration and colonization in metropolitan France in the early 1930s.” Extract from the presentation of the exhibition on the website of the Immigration Museum, available at: <https://www.histoire-immigration.fr/> (accessed March 18, 2022).

remain to a certain extent invisible in the press. Another important point, to highlight, is therefore the duty of memory which opens the opportunity to discuss the theme of immigration in order to deconstruct the prejudices and preconceived ideas circulating in the media. In June 2023, the Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration presents a new permanent exhibition that highlights key dates on the history of immigration in France, from the Ancien Régime to the migration crisis in the Mediterranean in 2015. A chronological discourse that brings important dates such as 1962 and the Algerian war and 1983 and the Marche des beurs, thus showing that the museum is conscious of the need to clarify the interconnections between colonial history and immigration history.

2.2. Analysis of permanent exhibitions: New scenographies, old paradigms

The new social history strongly influenced these museums where stories and “everyday objects” were at the center of permanent exhibitions in an effort to engage the public and critically reassess the dominant narratives of national history. The existence of personal objects in the constitution of the heritage of immigrants, preserved and kept in museums, shows the importance of individual memories in the establishment of a discourse on immigration.

Families and communities of migrant origin provide the essential materials for the exhibits on the history of immigration. For the latter, during this period, has recently emerged as a subject of scientific attention. Migration issues, multiculturalism and the relationship between museums, governments and communities are at the heart of many international research projects. Thus, the issues of memory around the history of immigration reveal the negotiations between the different actors in the processes of memory and heritage.

The analysis that I developed developed during my doctoral research favored a framework of international comparative research and cross-history where the transmission of knowledge is widely used to help understand the mechanisms of circulation of knowledge, cultural transfers, between professionals and international institutions that are part of the same network (as is the case for the immigration museums studied). This study used

a mixed approach between interviews, analysis of archives and different museographic routes (observation in the field). Three museums have been selected to illustrate institutions that prioritize the inclusion of cultural diversity.

The two main sources of data included interviews with museum curators, extensive archival investigation, and museum exhibitions observations and analysis of museum exhibitions. Additional information was sought from relevant press kits and reports such as scientific and cultural projects developed by the museums studied, for example.

The research reveals to us that curators of exhibitions on migration have constantly navigated in the face of a tension between a story of an inclusive and affirmative “nation of migrants”, and the more difficult stories of conflict, difference and exclusion that characterize the history of human migrations. Curatorial¹⁵ approaches have thus shaped by changing political climates, multiculturalism and demands for community representation in cultural institutions. As such, we can say that multiculturalism¹⁶ and social history¹⁷ strongly influence these early exposures to immigration. Concepts such as multiculturalism (CURTI & DAL POZZOLO 2008), multiculturalism (PARSANOGLOU 2004) and integration (WIEVIORKA 2008) can also raise questions and discussions as to their use during the creation of permanent exhibitions but we are not going to enter here into a deconstruction, nor in an in-depth analysis of these terms since this is not the main objective of this article.

From the mid-1980s, exhibitions aimed to integrate the experiences of minority migrants into a pluralistic national history in order to overturn

15. Here, we have developed a look at the way permanent exhibitions were designed during the creation of museums dedicated to the history of immigration. The constitution of these institutions as well as the political context at that precise moment strongly influenced the creation of the discourse disseminated by the permanent exhibitions. This analysis is at the heart of the second part of my thesis dedicated to the creation of the various museums and the whole process of building up a heritage dedicated to immigration.

16. The idea and the will to grant cultural minorities the recognition of particular rights are at the heart of this concept which pushes the will of certain governments and associations when creating museums dedicated to the history of immigration.

17. Social history is very present during prefiguration projects as well as in the scientific projects of the vast majority of museums dedicated to the history of immigration. In the context of the three museums analyzed in my thesis, this is particularly the case, and it is possible to see it through the displays of the permanent exhibitions.

previous monocultural narratives of national becoming. A second phase of exhibitions, from the mid-1990s, openly democratized these new migratory narratives in an attempt to seduce “native” populations¹⁸ who did not identify with multiculturalism, while elements of both approaches remain, over the past decade, museums dedicated to immigration have begun to look beyond migrations to the nation and an exploration of transnational networks, belonging and personal dislocation, and the idea of home. The exhibitions will then highlight the positive role of immigration and will rather favor a positive approach to the “integration” of immigrants into the host society. Initially, immigration museums therefore aimed to create an environment of institutional legitimization where the objects and stories of migrants could be considered an important part of the national heritage of these countries.

Ian McShane (2001), former curator of the National Museum of Australia, was the first to apply Hoge’s theories to exhibitions on immigration. In his 2001 article, “Difficult or Conventional? The History of Migration in Australian Museums,” McShane suggested that the emergence of immigration history in museums was linked to the rise of multiculturalism. However, the simple insertion of personal memories and personal journeys, rather of success, where integration into the new host country is done without many difficulties (or at least that is what is highlighted in these first exhibitions), show their limits and a demand for polyphony in speech is becoming more and more present.

Already for the director of the Smithsonian in the United States, Lonnie Bunch, history only makes sense when it is linked to the present. “Museums become better places when they recognize that they cannot be community centers, but they could be at the center of their communities. [...] What a curator is, especially a curator of history, is someone who holds the culture of the people in his hands. [...] Therefore, you must treat them with incredible respect” (JACKSON 2020), he recently said. The multitude of voices, which help place material culture in context, combined with history are methods

18. Native populations being those who hold “control” of national identity. In other words, populations of Anglo-Saxon origin (WASP) in the United States and populations of Portuguese origin in Brazil. The factor of race also remains central to this insertion into the national ‘normal’. Populations considered to be “white” integrate more quickly than other populations.

used by Lonnie Bunch to create exhibitions that challenge the status quo of American society.

Today, a greater desire to develop a programming around hospitality, mix and exile is the slogan in many museums. Many cultural institutions, artists and museums are engaged in a development and recognition of the wealth of culturally migratory experience. Often from local issues to remove them and transform through the artistic and creative gaze to make them universal. Contemporary art is thus increasingly present in the museums dedicated to the history of immigration¹⁹, often to bring a touch of subjectivity or fill, to a certain extent, the problems and the problematic points of the exhibitions.

However, the difficulties encountered in these curatorial steps of immigrant representations must push for reflection on the history of curatorial practices. It's necessary to recognize that this story has an impact on how relations between "us" and "others" are played. In addition, the history of these practices is not only done according to the evolutions of historiography and political contexts, but also on processes of collection and interpretation (objects and personal stories) that also have Advanced in response to various technological possibilities (the advance of digital in museum mediation, for example).

Recognize that this story has an impact on how relations between "us" and "others" are played. In addition, the history of these practices is not only done according to the evolutions of historiography and political contexts, but also on processes of collection and interpretation (objects and personal stories) that also have Advanced in response to various technological possibilities (the advance of digital in museum mediation, for example).

What one can call "the museography of the suitcase" (Witcomb 2018) highlights recurring objects like the suitcase that becomes a flagship object (Bergeron et al., 2016) of the museography of exhibitions dedicated to immigration. This simple object enhancement comes from the fact that the

19. In the three museums studied in my thesis, contemporary art is present. In the Brazilian case, the work of Nuno Ramos which was presented at the entrance of the permanent exhibition filled a significant discussion not only on the fragility of the bodies of immigrants (and their lives) but also the whole question of the flows of internal migration (mainly workers from the north-east of the country).

status of the object in society museums is not the cornerstone as it could be in a museum of fine arts, for example, where the public is invited to admire the masterpieces of the collections.

In society museums and, in our specific case, immigration museums, everyday objects (jewelry, clothes, letters and postcards) become object-cookies or memory objects that corroborate and serve as Museum support for immigrant stories. These objects become relics, objects of intercession with the risky times, past generations, recession objects to childhood, memory objects. They contain a “supplement of soul” and send us back to ourselves. Apart from the value of use, so there is the value that the object is attributed: Aesthetic value, heuristic value, symbolic value or evenness value. (Drouguet 2015, 181)

These curatorial approaches use the works of exhibitions differently (objects, images, texts and sounds) to create a range of personal experiences of the exhibition, each giving priority to different meanings (hearing, vision, the listening) of the visitor. Individually and in combination with each other, these points of attachment are developed in the exhibitions dedicated to the history of immigration.

According to Andrea Witcomb “These approaches shape the production of different sets of relations between” us “and” them”, “self”, and “the other”, actually producing four pedagogies very different in the way the museums manage the relations between different population groups “. The first is a “pedagogy of the look”, the second a “pedagogy of reading”, the third a “pedagogy of listening” and the fourth a “teaching of the feeling”. (WITCOMB 2018, 263)

Thus, oral history through the personal stories of immigrants, supported by archival documents and the memory objects, becomes one of the points of support of many exhibitions seeking to create an empathy in the visitor. It will be “guided” by The exhibition to better understand the point of view of the immigrant and perhaps, as a result, deconstruct a lot of these prejudices on immigration.

Despite this desire to handle an emotional link in the visitor, we must not forget that an immigration speech, based on museum representation, is conveyed by these exhibitions using these four educational axes demonstrated by Andrea Witcomb. It is, then, to deconstruct these mechanisms of the museum to analyze the words presented on the history of immigration.

2.3. What speech about immigration? A questioning of the permanent exhibitions

But what about the permanent exhibitions of the three museums studied: Ellis Island, Museu da Imigração and National Museum of Immigration History? The in-depth analysis of the permanent exhibitions reveals a museum speech rather focused on the praise of the contribution of migrants to the nation without, however, questioning the concept of foreigners (immigrants) or their status in the face of difficulties in integration and social integration. As Maryse Flavel, “[...], when in appearance these museums honor and celebrate” others “(immigrants, non-Western art), they end up dominating them and they control by offering them a partial image. (Favel 2014, 22)

This fragmentary representation is clearly reflected in the permanent exhibition *Repères* and its choices of themes that end up staging a social and economic reality far from the real situation experienced by a vast majority of migrants, mainly in the socio-political context of the last ten years. In 2020, the exhibition that was presented to visitors did not look like it was at the opening of the museum in October 2007: the initial part being cut to give more physical space to temporary exhibitions. Modified throughout its thirteen years of existence²⁰, this exhibition represents only a tiny part of what it was shown before elaborated in the scientific project of 2006.

This museum, in its permanent exhibition *Repères*²¹, reveals a deep discomfort with regard to the conflicts, difficulties and prejudices encountered by the different groups of migrants, “just like in the social and political reality in contemporary France. Finally and paradoxically, more than the “others”, this museum end up staging more France and an incommensurable universalism and a civilization that is afraid of “others”, but who holds “to appear”. (Flavel 2014, 22).

It is a question of highlighting the “us” to value the contributions of the other in the host society. As Maryse Flavel remarks: “Instead of correcting

20. We remind you that this exhibition is definitively closed and that the museum team is currently working on a new permanent exhibition which will open its doors to the public in 2023.

21. We remind you that this exhibition is definitively closed and that the museum team is currently working on a new permanent exhibition which will open its doors to the public in 2023.

a reflection on the national idea in order to overcome Euro-centric speeches for processing our perception of self and” others “; these museums reinforce prejudice because they exclude the view of the “others” on the “we”, their conception of what immigration means for them, what colonization has signed, what theft of art shifts has indicated in the country. Or, during the colonial era, what these objects meant to them. These are missing points of view so that we feel “foreigners to ourselves” and their speeches. This questioning of oneself is the essential condition to be able to reserve “the other”. (Favel 2014, 22) Museums objects must be put on display with information on the cultural and historical contexts from which they were collected and not reduced to foreign objects, exotic and beautiful, so that they also allow the visitor to understand “the other” in itself, as well as, the fundamental interaction between ‘us’ and the ‘others’ in the construction of scientific knowledge and the arts.

Better understanding “others” and oneself implies a dialogue between different cultures. So, in museums, why separate European/Western cultures from non-European/Eastern cultures, since cultures, knowledge and histories have been built in exchanges, both destructive and constructive? The interaction of immigrants with the French, their contributions (apart from kitchen objects and a few words) to French cultures, the impact of diverse cultures on science and the arts need to be presented in a more elaborate way. This would lead to a transversal organization of the museum, to take a new look at “other” cultures and ours, and to become aware of interbreeding.²²

The Ellis Island Immigration Museum highlights the praise of the American Dream. Even if the permanent exhibition tries to draw a “real” portrait of the difficulties encountered by migrants upon their arrival and the sorting done at Ellis Island (the processing of migrants), ultimately, the discourse remains that of the inclusion of its migrants. to America and the American dream materialized once past Ellis Island (we are not talking about the difficulties encountered by immigrants, arriving on American soil, once they have passed the check and the processing). The discourse

22. The concept of cultural mixing is characterized here by voluntary mixing where each culture can be respectful of the others and where the intermingling of cultures results from consciously made choices, according to tastes and free attractions for initially “foreign” cultures.

of the permanent exhibition also reinforces a vision of inclusion, without problems, of these migrants.

Already, the Museu da Imigração highlights the praise of Paulista²³ (and Paulistana²⁴) identity. The immigrants who arrived at the port of Santos, mostly Italians and Japanese, contributed to the economic growth of an already wealthy state and to the cultural richness of the city of São Paulo. The discourse of the permanent exhibition does not really talk about the obstacles encountered by immigrants in integrating into Brazilian society (the political and social discrimination suffered by Italian and Japanese immigrants, for example).

As we have seen, the Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration (MNHI) puts forward a discourse which aims to present the contributions of migrants to French culture but which ultimately reinforces the idea of integration without conflict by French society. The Palais de la Porte Dorée becomes, to a certain extent, a conflictual site that is not really contextualised and does not dialogue with the permanent exhibition. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why these museums go through several reformulations of their respective scientific projects and exhibitions.

At Ellis Island, the opening of a new permanent exhibition in May 2015 seems to want to fill the lack of discourse on contemporary immigration issues in the United States. This new permanent exhibition, which covers the period from the 1960s until today, presents the political transformations in the migratory framework in the United States as well as the new ethnic groups which settle during this period. This is the only change in the framework of the long-term exhibitions presented at Ellis Island: since 1990, the exhibitions presented were always the same. However, again, the strong tensions between Mexico and the United States, for example, are not dealt with in depth and we always have the impression that the museum ends up conveying an image of the American dream always possible where integration into American society is achieved for those struggling to achieve their dreams.

23. Paulista refers to one born in the state of São Paulo.

24. Paulistano refers to one who was born in the city of São Paulo.

Since its official opening in 1993, the Museu da imigração de São Paulo has changed its name and scientific project several times, which reflects the different concepts put forward by the Museum (place of memory, memorial²⁵, museum). But one thing that has always been important for the São Paulo Museum is the support of communities of immigrant origin who have always used the space of the Hospedaria for their community meetings.²⁶

The CNHI, now MNHI, is the most recent of these museums (it is barely fourteen years old) and it has already changed its name, logo and a new scientific project has been underway since 2014.²⁷ “The CNHI is coming up against questions even more seriously than my reading of the historical journey. Here are the most frequently mentioned problems, which have already been the subject of numerous articles: the setting is Le Palais de la Porte Dorée which creates a contradiction between the building and the discourse of the permanent exhibition. “Instead of reflecting from start to finish the impact of immigration on French history and heritage, this museum seems to be a museum of “others” whose story we cannot tell. (FAUV-EL 2014, p. 120)

The successive changes in museum names, scientific projects and museographic routes do not remedy the real problem present in the permanent exhibitions of migration museums: creating new exhibitions, but under the prism of old paradigms. The exhibition presents the immigrants (their journey upon arrival in the official reception areas for Ellis Island and São Paulo) but does not really present the real journey of these immigrants (obstacles encountered, xenophobia, social exclusion, poverty, etc.). In the three permanent exhibitions, analysed immigrants are presented as being all integrated into the host country without much difficulty. For example, the exhibitions mentioned here do not deal directly with issues such as xenophobia, racism and social exclusion: even if these themes can be

25. Memorial is what relates to memory, that is to say the ability to record, preserve and restore memories for an individual but also a commemorative monument.

26. Even though communities mostly approve of the museum’s discourse, during an interview with the former director of the Museum Marília Bonas in February 2015, I learned that the museum also pays attention to comments and criticisms on the discourse of the museum’s permanent exhibition.

27. At the moment the museum is undergoing renovations and a new permanent exhibition will be open to the public in 2023.

evoked, they are not fully developed. Hence, perhaps, the lack of identification of many newly arrived immigrants when visiting these museums. (SMITH 2017)²⁸

Nevertheless, the analysis of the permanent exhibitions reveals recurring master themes which also open up fruitful perspectives. The exhibitions analysed during my doctoral thesis present different scenographies but the topics covered remain the same when we talk about immigration: departure; the trip (and crossing the border); arrival and the “triage process” with local authorities (medical visits, refusal or acceptance of entry into the host country); adaptation in the host country (or not – “rooting or not”); contemporary migration flows (new communities).

These subjects also lead to the development of broader discourses/analyses within the exhibitions. The theme of the border, for example, can promote reflections on the question of migration policies, on the changing definition of wanted/unwanted migrants or on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, while travel can be used as metaphorical rite of passage, process of transformation and change.

These themes essentially function as common threads of the museum narrative recounting the experience of the immigrant. The geographical maps and the chronological context (as landmarks) are also presented to the visitor as historical support.

For example, the permanent exhibition (Repères) of the Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration focused precisely on “small objects slipped into the pocket” before departure. A strong emphasis was placed on individual memories and personal narratives of departure and travel: the migratory experience was presented on an individual level (especially when looking at the *Galerie des Dons*).

Different from the permanent exhibitions of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York and the Museu da Imigração in São Paulo, which support their museum narrative on the history of the building and the path of the immigrant upon arrival in these places of passage that constitute

28. This article by Laurajanne Smith presents an analysis of the reception of exhibitions dealing with the theme of immigration among the Australian public. This is an important article since it shows that not everyone identifies with the stories and memories of immigrants presented in these exhibitions, even if the aim is to create empathy in the visitor.

these institutions (the governmental institutions for “sorting” immigrants), the exhibition *Repères* was organized around concepts and keywords one might say, which guide the migratory experience. Thus, it is logical that the exhibition had as its starting point the concept of departure.

The main goal of an exhibition is, to some extent, to disturb the visitor in his intellectual comfort. It is about arousing emotions, frictions and desires to know more about the subject presented. But the act of exhibiting also means constructing a narrative specific to the museum, made up of objects, texts and iconography. It is to put objects at the service of a theoretical statement, a discourse or a story and not the other way around. By suggesting the essential through critical distance, they are an important tool to fight against preconceived ideas and stereotypes.

New perspectives on the representation of human migrations therefore seem to be taking shape, favoring the contribution of the different communities concerned. The various museums dedicated to the history of immigration in the world remain starting points for the creation of spaces for dialogue on contemporary political debates concerning human migrations as well as spaces for reflection on the future of our societies by favoring greater inclusion and social justice. The importance of carrying out work on cultural practices and transmissions in our contemporary societies as well as on creations resulting from the experiences of exile are at the heart of the projects developed by the various immigration museums that we have had the opportunity to visit²⁹. The analysis of the representations of immigration in the host societies remains essential, not only in terms of the development and diversification of the public, but also in their capacity for inclusion and social justice. By adapting their offer to the principles of a democratization of culture, immigration museums open their space to dialogue and intercultural sharing.

The phenomenon of migration and the history of immigration have become major themes in the world landscape of museums. The projects of immigration museums have been driven by the desire to recognize cultural diversity. Today, they claim to be, to a certain extent, as ambassadors of

29. During my doctoral research, I had the opportunity not only to visit the three museums chosen for the academic analysis several times but also other museums in Italy, Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Spain.

“intercultural dialogue and globalization” who intend to embody a new plural identity. However, these museums are also confronted with changes in geopolitical relations and the evolution of identity discourses that question the vision of a “happy multiculturalism”. (VAN GEERT Fabien 2020)

In conclusion, we can say that migration museums aim to build an inclusive narrative about migration, highlighting the contribution of immigration to national identity and culture. An interdisciplinary approach³⁰ is therefore often favored by these museums, thus bringing new perspectives that can challenge our own paradigms on the society or group represented. The contribution of contemporary art, for example, combined with a museographic journey that favors oral history and witness objects, affirms the museum’s desire to dialogue directly with its public and to bring it to feel empathy (LANDSBERG 2009, p. 221) towards the subject matter. The history of migration is thus recognized on a more personal level and therefore appropriated by the visitors.

However, as discussed throughout this article, their attempt to create a polyphonic and inclusive permanent exhibition is not fully developed as their permanent exhibitions still present narratives that do not really speak of contemporary challenges faced by immigrants, or their struggles to feel “integrated” into the new country. Concepts such as multiculturalism³¹ are also not fully discussed although cultural contributions are celebrated. The celebratory discourse conveyed by the exhibitions where the cultural and economic contributions of migrants are valued at the expense of a more in-depth discussion of the obstacles (legal and political) to the integration of migrants.

30. As we presented at the beginning of the article, immigration museums, even if they are mostly defined as history museums, they present collections that are closer to society museums and which quite often present works of contemporary art also with the aim of creating empathy in the visitor.

31. The definition of the Larousse dictionary is as follows: an American current of thought which questions the cultural hegemony of the ruling white layers with regard to minorities (ethnic, cultural, etc.) and pleads in favor of a full recognition of these last. Thus, the permanent exhibitions briefly mentioned here all work on highlighting the memories of ethnic groups other than the dominant one. Museums dedicated to the history of immigration are particularly rich sites for identifying the curatorial strategies involved in each, given that they are, to some extent, primarily concerned with defining the relationships between different cohorts of people.

Thus, we have the impression of always navigating through a presentation of the paths of migrants who have succeeded in their integration and adaptation in the host society. In other words, whether in France, the United States or Brazil, museum narratives are developed around the concept of integration into the new society. The celebration of the personal and collective paths of “successful immigrants” is put forward to enhance their contribution to national identity and culture. However, the links between the history of colonization and immigration still remain challenges for curators and their design teams when creating new exhibitions dedicated to working on the history of a city and/or a country in a more inclusive way.

Finally, museums dedicated to the history of immigration remain recent initiatives in the international museum landscape, but as the theme gains prominence in the international political scenario, they gain space in contemporary discussions on cultural heritage and social inclusion. Although some museum professionals argue that the ideal scenario would be to include the history of immigration in national history museums instead of having a museum dedicated to immigration itself, for the moment it is essential to have a platform to discuss and reflect on immigration as well as on the migratory phenomenon in our contemporary societies. With the increasing role of museums as social justice actors, immigration museums could turn into a platform for discussion on the socio-economic inclusion of immigrants and refugees.

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