



Museums as Third Spaces for Intercultural Dialogues

Guest post by Juana Du & Mingshi Cui

There has been an increasing awareness in recent years regarding the indispensable role that museums can play in encouraging intercultural dialogues and enhancing social inclusiveness. The imaginary cultural space of the museum has propelled us to a realization that we are in an era where interculturality, transculturalism, and the eventual prospect of identifying cosmopolitan citizenship can become a reality. Researchers have been examining the museum-based pedagogy of transculturalism (Lewison Flint, & Sluys, 2002), viewing museums as a third space where visitors from different backgrounds could learn more about other cultures and how different cultures collide and interact with each other throughout history. Yet, there has not been much study on how the visitors navigate the museum collections on display by engaging in intercultural learning activities in a way that encourages self-reflection on cultural identities and enhances a sense of global citizenship. Thus, our research investigates the potentiality of museums to be transformed into third spaces where visitors may actively explore a complex multitude of identities and cosmopolitan citizenship.

Cosmopolitanism, as suggested by Hannerz (1990), is a model of meaning-making, an act which brings cosmopolitanism into being through particular frames of action and interpretation. On the one hand, it shows that individuals are empowered to identify themselves as ‘citizens of a universal state of humanity’ (Kant, 1970, pp. 206) with the entitlement to participate in global democratic discussions (Linklater, 1998). On the other hand, it also reflects the citizens’ willingness and capabilities to accept plural cultural identities. Being able to identify themselves as global citizens means that they have the competencies to understand basic knowledge about other cultures and to respect and empathize with people who developed different sets of beliefs and value systems through their intercultural experiences (Broome, 2017; Broome, 1991; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). Adopting cosmopolitan visions while fashioning local identities could offer critical insights into historical and social issues, inviting more reflective thinking on intercultural encounters under the context of power imbalances (Penny, 1999).

Recent studies found that museums could play an important role in promoting mutual understanding between different cultural groups. According to Bodo (2009, 2012), artifacts collected and displayed in museums could be perceived as cultural objects whose meanings could be renegotiated, reconstructed, and shared for social interaction. With its diverse body of historical objects obtained from different cultures, the museum could immerse its audiences in the richness of cultural diversity and trigger visitors’ deeper thinking and reflections on the cultural identities

of themselves and others (Cuccioletta, 2016; Delgado, 2009; Crowley & Matthews, 2006). In this way, museum visitors are encouraged to embrace cultural literacies—the basic knowledge about a particular culture and the capability to respect and empathize with people from other cultural backgrounds (Anderson, 2004).

We conducted an empirical study in a provincial museum in British Columbia, Canada. With a combined method including participative observation and semi-structured interviews, we looked into the international visitors' experiences, to answer the following questions: How have cultural and historical museum exhibitions put visitors in contact with the other and fostered an understanding of the other? And how has transculturalism led to the establishment of cosmopolitan citizenship?

Findings in the final report (Du & Cui, 2021) show that mindfully designed museum education activities would encourage student visitors in museums to absorb useful information about past intercultural encounters, paving the way for the development of cosmopolitan citizenships. Based on the data collected from observations and interviews as well as the informal conversations with the participating international student groups, we evidenced the necessity of designing interactive learning activities as effective facilitations for museum visitors to cross the cultural barriers that hinder understanding of local cultural diversity and historical issues. The study demonstrated that visitors from a non-Western cultural background find the different curatorial styles, educational styles, and language barriers confusing during their museum experiences, which highlights the importance of incorporating bilingual reading materials and interactive activities familiar to the visitor group. With such activities providing guidance to aid visitors in comprehending and critically reflecting on the museum narrative, they could gradually develop their cultural awareness and put themselves in the historical contexts of colonialism and imperialism documented by the objects on display. In this way the visitors could emotionally engage with the museum learning experience and develop cultural empathy, activating a sense of cosmopolitanism through the intercultural learning experience in the museum.

This research offers several practical implications for both museum administrators and intercultural educators. First, it suggests that museum educators design interactive exhibitions creatively to encourage transferring exhibitions into a third space in order to facilitate intercultural dialogues. Second, this research suggests museum administrators can improve their services to a more diverse group of audiences so as to enhance the inclusiveness of museum exhibitions. Finally, we suggest that cultural sites such as museums and other cultural institutions or sites may find ways to incorporate diverse methods and transform themselves into a third space that provides a more favorable cultural context for learning and transcultural communication.

To cite this article, use this format:

Du, Juana, & Cui, Michelle. (15 April 2024). Guest post: Museums as third spaces for intercultural dialogues. Center for Intercultural Dialogue. Available from: <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2024/04/15/juana-du-mingshi-cui-museums-as-third-spaces-for-intercultural-dialogue>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

References

Anderson, G. (2004). *Reinventing the museum: Historical and contemporary perspectives on the paradigm shift*. California, CA: AltaMira Press.

Bodo, S. (2009). The challenge of creating third spaces guidelines for MAP for ID pilot projects. In S. Bodo, K. Gibbs, & M. Sani (Eds.), [*Museums as places for intercultural dialogue: Selected practices from Europe*](#). London, UK: MAP for ID Group.

Bodo, S. (2012). Museums as intercultural spaces. In R. Sandell, & E. Nightingale (Eds.), *Museums, equality and social justice* (pp. 181–192). Oxon, UK: Taylor & Francis.

Broome, B. J. (1991). Building shared meaning: Implications of a relational approach to empathy for teaching intercultural communication. *Communication Education*, 40(3), 235–249.

Broome, B.J. (2017). Intercultural empathy. In Y. Y. Kim (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of intercultural communication* (pp. 1-6). Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

Crowley, V., & Matthews, J. (2006). Museum, memorial and mall: Postcolonialism, pedagogies, racism and reconciliation. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 14(3), 263.

Cuccioletta, D. (2016). Multiculturalism or transculturalism: Towards a cosmopolitan citizenship. *London Journal of Canadian Studies*, 17(1), 1-11.

Delgado, E. (2009). Museums as spaces of negotiation. In S. Bodo, K. Gibbs, & M. Sani (Eds.), [*Museums as places for intercultural dialogue: Selected practices from Europe*](#). London, UK: MAP for ID Group.

Du, J., & Cui, M. (2021). Intercultural dialogues in third spaces: A study of learning experiences of museum visitors. *Journal of Transcultural Communication*, 1(1), 79-101.

Eisenberg, N., & Fabes, R. (1990). Empathy: Conceptualization, measurement, and relation to prosocial behavior. *Motivation and Emotion*, 14, 131–149.

Hannerz, U. (1990). Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7(2–3), 237–251.

Kant, I. (1970a) ‘Perpetual Peace’, in M. Forsyth, H.M.A. Keens-Soper and P. Savigear (eds.), *The theory of international relations: Selected texts from Gentili to Treitschke*. London, UK: Allen and Unwin.

Lewison, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts*, 79(5), 382–392.

Linklater, A., (1998). Cosmopolitan citizenship. *Citizenship Studies*, 2(1), 23-41.

Penny, G. (1999). Fashioning local identities in an age of nation-building: Museums, cosmopolitan visions, and intra-German competition. *German History*, 17(4), 489–505.