MUSEUMS AND COMMUNITIES

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PART I

On Civil Society and Social Identity

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This part of the volume takes a broad perspective on museum-community relations. The essays in this section examine how identity is manifested and experienced in public culture, which includes settings such as museums and fairs. The examples include commercial expositions in India, minority museums in the United States, community festivals in Minnesota, and art museums in New York City. People come to these events and places to be edified, educated, and entertained, but these settings are also sites for the play of identity. Art, history, and ethnography displays, even natural-history exhibitions, are all involved in defining the identities of communities—or in denying them identity. Every one of these museum events and places are part of public culture, which can be shown to take on a large part of the responsibility of defining civil society.¹

Public culture provides some relatively formal settings for definitions and experiences of identities, but public culture is only one forum in which people experience who they are. There are others. Identities are made and experienced in settings that differ from the social spaces of public culture in multiple ways. These other settings can include the intimacy of the family or the sacred quality of religious
worship. No matter where or when identities are defined, they are acted out in ways that often contradict official definitions of a social group's identity. The way people perform their social roles shows more about how they feel about their identity than does the content of the roles themselves. And the way people perform their roles and express their individual feelings demonstrates that more than one identity enters into their actions. People know themselves to have more identities than they are allowed in a single setting, and these identities often overlap and even contradict one another.

The essays in part 1 discuss four aspects of the process of identity formation as these emerge in museum-community relations: (1) identities are defined by the content and form of public-culture events such as exhibitions and performances; (2) identities are subjectively experienced by people participating in public culture, often in ways conditioned by their other identities and experiences; (3) expressions of identities can contain multiple and contradictory assertions—that is, there can be more than one message in a single expression or performance of identity—and the same is true for the experience of identities; and (4) identities are rarely, if ever, pure and uncontaminated by other identities, because they are usually fabricated from a mix of elements.

There are many types of identities other than community identities, but this is a book devoted to museums and communities. Nonetheless, community identities cannot be discussed without first considering identity in general and the relationship between community identities and personal identities in particular. Even museum settings relate personal and community identities: consider Thomas Crow’s analysis of how “the public” came to be defined in eighteenth-century Paris (discussed in the introduction to this volume). As Crow argues, the experience of visiting an exhibition and judging its materials is often intensely personal. But museum professionals or cultural activists who try to explain and account for the ways audiences experience and respond to exhibitions usually invoke collective entities: “She’s Latino”; “He’s middle-class”; “They’re children.” We believe that communities exist within us in some way, and that their values affect our perceptions and structure our own personal values. Hence, the individual experience of viewing a museum exhibition is also organized by memberships in (that is, identification with) communities.

This belief results at least in part from the ways personal identities and community identities interact. Personal identities are complex entities that are fashioned from community identities as well as other identities and experiences. Similarly, community identities emerge out of personal identities. There cannot be a community if there are no individuals who think of themselves as members of it. What Benedict Anderson says about nations, that they are *imagined* communities, is true of all communities. In order for communities to exist in time and space, they must be imagined and represented by individuals as significant components of their identities.

Identities are not easily known or clearly experienced phenomena. Personhood, Meyer Fortes observes, poses problems that individuals have to solve. These include formulating answers to the questions of how we know ourselves to be the persons we are supposed to be and how we display our personhood. These are questions frequently asked in the literature on personhood in anthropology and philosophy. They arise out of the distinction that is commonly made between the person (the socially defined aspect of the self) and the individual (the uniquely experienced side of the self). Thus personhood is a Janus-faced phenomenon. Individuals strive to be persons, attempting to fulfill expectations they have come to hold of what it is to play a role or be a member of a community. Ideals are often invoked in this process, and museums are clearly places where representations of such ideals are displayed. These ideals communicate messages about how persons should be defined; they set up models for behavior or display modes of being that are to be avoided.

In many cultural displays, ideals about the person are often asserted tacitly, derived from implicit contrasts between the viewers and makers of exhibitions, on the one hand, and the persons and cultures displayed in the exhibitions, on the other. We might call this the ideological aspect of identity making. However, people think of themselves as being more than the sum total of their social roles and personhood. They also define themselves in terms of “those particular contingencies which make each of us ‘I’ rather than a copy or replica of somebody else.” This is the subjective aspect of identity. The person and the individual are always simultaneously cooperating and at war with each other. There is a parallel here with museum displays, which are one of the sites in which identities are made: here museums and communities simultaneously cooperate and do battle.

All of this (and more) enters into that element of museum-community relations that revolves around the play of identity. Museumgoers usually come to exhibitions with expectations about what
they will find in museums; often they are disappointed at not finding their expectations realized or infuriated at seeing what they had hoped would be omitted.

Exhibition makers have parallel problems. They too have identities; these include their professional standing and commitments they have to serve the community. Exhibitions portray their makers' sense of how the world is defined. This sense is not unrelated to the role museums play as archives of knowledge and objects. Responsible museum personnel identify with the professional and curatorial obligations associated with this museum role, and seek to portray the social world in terms that honor their sense of purpose and identity. Yet they are also members of communities, and bring to their world personal and communal histories that often relate to and interact with the histories of the communities that compose the constituency of their museums. This complex situation creates a postmodern problem for museums. First, they must fashion exhibitions that can present multiple perspectives on the world. Then they must ensure that those perspectives respect but also are critical of not only museums' own worldview but also the worldview of the people whose lives, culture, knowledge, and objects they are exhibiting. This will require exhibitions that encompass all aspects of cultural experience, both the typical (a culture or community's ideas of what it is to be a person, to be a member of that culture or community) and the unique (what it is to be an individual in that culture or community and have experiences that are different from another's).

The essays collected in this section all address these central issues of identity formation. Some focus on personhood and identity, some on exhibitions, and some on both. Appadurai and Breckenridge's essay shows how colonial displays in Indian museums are interpreted by postcolonial Indian audiences in ways that go far beyond the images presented in the exhibitions themselves. While colonial messages and postcolonial interpretations engage and contradict each other, the multiplicity of identities that are asserted and experienced in museum exhibitions are affected by a set of interpretive processes that derive less from museums themselves than from other aspects of public culture in India today.

Appadurai and Breckenridge argue that public culture is changing rapidly in India. It is becoming a site for the production of a national culture that is particularly important for a society in which the other institutions of civil society, such as schools, are often in direct competition with the state. Aspects of public culture in postcolonial India such as television, films, advertising, commercial expositions, and tourism developed not sequentially but simultaneously, and in a world in which physical distance is rarely any longer a barrier to interaction among different ethnic and national groups. As a result, an aesthetic of viewing has emerged that is at once transnational and Indian. Appadurai and Breckenridge argue that the Indian public applies this aesthetic, rather than different sets of interpretive skills, to these different forms of public culture. Consequently the distinction between "serious" and "popular" culture that we in Europe and North America tend to make is not particularly relevant for Indian audiences' experience of museum exhibitions. In a sense Appadurai and Breckenridge's vision of the Indian public is George MacDonald's nightmare vision of the North American future—one in which the public cannot distinguish between the educational messages created by exhibition makers and the trivializations of culture perpetrated by the popular media in the name of commercialization (see his essay in part 2). Yet there are differences, for Appadurai and Breckenridge believe that what is important in India is the very way in which the various forms of public culture affect one another and the way they combine local, national, and transnational elements. The result of these conflicting and contradictory identities and histories is a truly hybrid cultural formation. But the existence of this hybrid should not be shocking, for all cultural formations are hybrid. Appadurai and Breckenridge's achievement is to show the historical contexts and patterns of mixing that make Indian public culture what it is today.

Edmund Barry Gaither's essay also examines the multiple nature of identities in museums. His is a passionate plea to acknowledge the role museums can play in the reconstruction of civil society. But he asserts that we must also acknowledge the complex nature of peoples' identities and, by implication, the histories of their communities. Gaither rejects simple distinctions between assimilation and separatism; for example, people have the capacity to be both African American and American at the same time. The problem is not how people choose identities, but the checkered history of how those identities have been manifested in civil society and exhibited in museums.

James Baldwin elegantly describes how African Americans have subjectively experienced the public denial of their identity (which Gaither calls "silences") in a way that illuminates the suspicion many African Americans and other minority peoples feel toward museums:
It is a very grave matter to be forced to imitate a people for whom you know—which is the price of your performance and survival—you do not exist. It is hard to imitate a people whose existence appears, mainly, to be made tolerable by their bottomless gratitude that they are not, thank heaven, you.9

The silences do more than simply deny African American existence. In exhibitions that celebrate cultural achievement, the very fact that the achievements of people of color are ignored introduces implicit messages about their worth. A hierarchy of cultures is erected, in which those worth examining are separated from those that deserve to be ignored. Racial imagery and ethnocentrism can be communicated by what is not exhibited as well as by what is. Large, historically important museums, such as the universal survey art museums, now have to face the consequences of their history of silence. Communities are often no longer content to remain passive recipients of museum activities. At the very least they demand to be included in the celebration of cultural achievements.

Hierarchical assertions of cultural differences tell a story that has a disturbing history with contemporary ramifications for all museums, even those that do not have older exhibit halls badly needing revision. African American and other ethnic museums have had to engage in tasks that involve more than simply filling the silences of other museums' exhibitions and educational activities. As Fath Davis Ruffins's essay in part 3 on African American preservation activities demonstrates, these museums have been involved in combating racist imagery and in reconstructing self-identities and knowledge about heritage and achievements that have become attenuated in many communities. Gaither supports John Kinard's call for the museum to act as an agent of redemption in society (see Ruffins's essay). But Gaither believes that not only minority communities will be redeemed by minority museums. The challenges minority museums present to larger, more well-established museums will inevitably result in those museums changing the stories they tell and reaching out to wider audiences. They will not only fill in the silences about major segments of American civil society and world cultures; they will also correct the messages they deliver. Let us hope so. A major reason for Gaither's optimism is that he believes minority museums will create a new cadre of museumgoers who will demand more from the older museums. As the composition of museums' constituencies changes, so will the nature of museums' participation in civil society. Gaither’s hopes also rest upon his belief in the capacity of people to make the effort to identify with what they see in museums—if they are given the chance to do so and if the exhibition provides support and encouragement. This identification will be only the beginning; curiosity and a desire for knowledge will follow, and museums are the natural entities for satisfying these desires, thus producing more knowledgeable citizens.

Gaither advocates a positive role for museums in society. He envisions museums as crucibles for forging citizens who see themselves as part of civil society, as important members of a valid social order. Museums have the responsibility to compensate for the failure of other institutions, such as schools, to show members of minority groups their stake in society. Museums can play this role because they are spaces for the play of identities, and the multiple nature of those identities can be made part of museums' exhibitions and programs. For Gaither, museums that serve communities with multiple identities, such as African American museums, are now important locations for innovative practices that will show the way for mainstream museums to expand their constituencies and reform their exhibiting and educational programs.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña defines identities in a way that goes beyond thinking about them as multiple and complex. Assertions about identity may attempt analytically to disentangle and separate out components of a particular community's identity and try to show how people shift from one identity to another, but this interpretation ignores the perspective from the margins. The making of identities is as intrinsically "syncretic, diverse, and complex as the fractured realities we are trying to define." Gómez-Peña writes from the border, that is, from the point of view of people who continuously melt down, merge, and amalgamate seemingly incommensurate senses of identity and points of view. He calls for the acknowledgement of a new "world topography," which implies a way of seeing that acknowledges that the margins are actually the center, that the center is continually shifting, and that it is the task of the artist to bring out the hybrid and dynamic nature of these fractured realities.

Gómez-Peña appears to be taking a postmodern position—to be arguing that the goal of the artist should be not to reproduce the dominant aesthetic but to resist it, and to celebrate the particular stories through which people make spaces in a world that seems determined to organize everything for them.10 Yet Gómez-Peña denies any affinity with postmodernism: "Postmodernism is a crumbled conceptual architecture, and we are tired of walking among someone else's ruins."
He desires to replace postmodernist critique with "experimental techniques and ... practices to intervene directly in the world." This is a political position that recognizes that today's margin may be tomorrow's center, and that to be at the center is to reproduce the structure of hegemony. His are subtle but penetrating observations. Gómez-Peña acknowledges that power is always a danger and can be fought only with politics. All hegemonic assertions, which are embedded in definitions of the canon and criteria of taste, must be fought with "creative appropriation, expropriation, and subversion of dominant cultural forms."

Assertions of cultural centrality are also assertions of hegemony for Gómez-Peña. The claim that any artist is centered in his or her culture, often made about Latino and African American artists, is a hegemonic claim that seeks to prevent the search for new content and for an art that is against "monoculturalism." Such claims implicitly define a canon against which other works of art or forms of culture will be judged. The result is that the hierarchical structure of evaluations set up by dominant cultures is reproduced in minority and subordinate cultures. Gómez-Peña counsels resistance. "To step outside one's culture equals to walk outside of the law," he says, "but it also means to maintain one's dignity outside the law." This is an ideal, not a possibility. What Gómez-Peña envisions is a stance that does not blindly accept the world as being defined by the tenets of any single culture. Such dominating practices have no place on the border.

For museums, this implies that exhibitions that claim to present true and authentic pictures of peoples and their cultures—that attempt to define what is essentially African or American or English or Mexican—are hegemonic practices that reproduce the values and privileges of the center. Gómez-Peña denies all claims to the privileged possession of any experience, whether it be ethnic, racial, or artistic.

Gómez-Peña counters Gaither's call for reconstruction with a demand for perpetual deconstruction. He is leery of the way in which claims to cultural authenticity (that is, being a source for the correct cultural traditions) can also be strategies of oppression. What should museums do, for example, with the assertion that Native American religious traditions require that women not be allowed to touch tribal objects in museums? This has already happened. If museums have no right to assert a dominant perspective vis-à-vis minorities, what rights do they have to assert any perspective about anyone? Gómez-Peña's answer, with which I agree, is that neither museums nor communities should have special interpretive privileges. Rather, they must be mutually responsible. Museum practices should be reviewed continually and judged in terms of multiple perspectives. Just as museums have the obligation to examine the consequences of their own exhibiting and educational practices, so communities have the responsibility to see that exhibitions about themselves are more than celebratory.

All types of museums have responsibilities to communities. These matters are not just the special preserve of cultural-history or ethnic and minority museums. Art and science museums have the same obligations as the others. Science museums, for example, usually define themselves as possessing privileged access to verifiable truths. But science is as partial a perspective on the world as any other. Like any other body of knowledge, it can be used in a hegemonic fashion. Even the seemingly innocent and uncriticizable demand that natural-history museums play a major role in advocating environmental concerns should be critically evaluated, for far too often in the history of the environmental movement, unconfirmed facts and the selection of issues that are mostly white and middle-class concerns get presented as the outcome of "scientific research." This is yet another situation in which Western points of view assume a falsely universal significance. Sadly, these points of view can become the justification for doing a great deal of harm to the rural poor and the native peoples of the Third World. For example, a recent exhibition on the highland gorilla and its status as an endangered species, which toured the major natural-history museums of the United States, uncritically reproduced some of the most offensive racial stereotypes about the sexuality of Africans. Yet not a single public protest was made by any responsible scientific institution, nor was there any mention of the racial imagery and attitudes in the reviews of the exhibition. If museum professionals take up Gómez-Peña's challenge, the cultural assumptions they will have to confront critically include their own. They too will have to walk outside their cultures and the law, with dignity.

Gómez-Peña's essay raises questions about multiple perspectives, the hybrid nature of expression, and politics that are addressed in more detail in the remaining two essays in this section. Robert Lavenda and Vera Zolberg both consider a number of issues directly related to how identities are defined in exhibitions and how these definitions are experienced by the different parties in the exhibiting process. These issues include how perspectives define different voices, even when people have more than one perspective and claim more than one voice at the same time; the ambivalence that is present in communities about the role of the museum or festival as a certifier of culture; and questions of control as a primary political issue. This last issue is one that museums and communities must continuously man-
and different points of view expressed at the same time as their existence is denied.

While the festivals assert that they are the expression of a unified, inclusive community; for example, rural towns are divided between farmers and merchants, the older, established members of the community and the unemployed or underemployed young, and sometimes between male and female. Though small-town festivals explicitly undertake the promotion of a communitywide identity, in practice they often reinforce social divisions. By contrast, St. Paul’s long-established and nationally famous urban festival is a successful combination of celebration of bourgeois achievement and ritualized mockery of social pretensions. In Lavenda’s description of the St. Paul Winter Carnival’s events we can see a familiar phenomenon: the assertion of a common community of high and low that is achieved by the denial of social claims. This is an element missing in the formal organization of the small-town festivals. It may be that in small towns social relations are too intimate and face-to-face for the community even to imagine its differences in festivals. But even there multiple voices are manifested and different points of view expressed at the same time as their existence is denied.

In St. Paul issues of gender and class intrude on the organization of festival performances. Vulcans, the anonymous pranksters who mock the pretensions of the festival’s royal court, also act out a carnivalesque denial of bourgeois standards of sexuality. But their playful accounting of women is no longer acceptable in a society in which violence against women has become a public issue. The wives of the princes of the royal court are now included in the public ceremonies as well, but Lavenda shows that the liberal assertions of gender complementarity serve only to emphasize the actual gender inequality.

Wives make brief appearances that only demonstrate their irrelevance to the celebration of individual male achievement that is at the heart of the festival’s public ceremonies.

Class differences and conflict intervene in all the festivals Lavenda discusses, but in the St. Paul case the class-based control of the festival extends far beyond the control in the other Minnesota festivals described in the essay. The urban nature of the St. Paul milieu enables the organizers to have far less contact with lower-class audiences than is possible in small towns. The St. Paul elite do not need to keep their own activities secret, and the vast expenditures required for their participation provide an effective barrier against lower-class groups penetrating their events.

But this creates a problem. After all, the St. Paul Winter Carnival is a community festival. How is community participation maintained at the same time that segments of the community are excluded? This issue has become a gender issue as well as a class issue. As St. Paul becomes more diverse, it may become a racial and ethnic issue as well. Lavenda examines how this problem is managed in all the Minnesota festivals by describing how voices are defined and experienced.

The voices Lavenda discusses have both official and unofficial sides. The festivals are defined by official voices, but even those voices can express doubt, as in the halfhearted attempts to give wives a significant role. In St. Paul the institutionalized mockery of the Vulcans provides an official setting for unofficial attitudes to be voiced; here, too, doubt and uncertainty creep in about how different segments of the community have been defined and treated.

Sometimes people do begin to voice the ways in which their subjective experiences can contradict dominant voices or official definitions of cultures. This is now happening in some of the festivals Lavenda mentions and in some museums. People know how they are defined and often find means of resisting definitions. The result is that voices and definitions become multiple and contradictory, but not ar-
Art museums also have complex senses of their mission and identity. Just as artists aspire to recognition and reputation, so do art museums. There are few directors of art museums who do not define their legacy as a distinguished collection. Zolberg observes that `artists tend not to form durable communities.' When they do so it is usually because they have a temporary sense of shared identity as a group that is resisting a definition of a community is their interest in asserting their local existence in the art world.

Zolberg's essay describes how artists in other major cities, including Washington and Chicago, have reacted against the history of art as it has been defined by critics and museums. They also seek to resist the silences in terms of which they are defined. It may be that artists' most important experience in the process of defining themselves as a community is their interest in asserting their local existence in the art world.

Zolberg observes that "artists tend not to form durable communities." When they do so it is usually because they have a temporary sense of shared identity as a group that is resisting a definition of art and defining new modes of expression. Zolberg cites the dadaist tradition of flouting bourgeois conventions as a significant theme in contemporary art and observes that this pits many artists against art museums, which have patrons who possess bourgeois taste and often assert bourgeois moral standards.

Even more important, however, is the tendency of many contemporary artists to subvert the categories of high and low cultural expression on which museums rely to construct an artistic canon. This conflict can be observed in the reactions to the Museum of Modern Art's massive but ambivalent attempt to exhibit the high and low distinction in modern art (the 1990 exhibition High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture). MOMA was attacked from both the artists' right and left; on the one hand, it was condemned for abandoning its role as guardian of aesthetic standards, and on the other it was condemned for castrating the best and most outrageous in popular arts in its exhibition. The curators' nervousness was manifested in the opening pages of the catalogue, which made multiple references to the religious quality of high art. Zolberg argues that museums do not like to deal with artists as a community, but attempt to interact with them as individuals. This is a classic response to community demands on cultural institutions. Institutions assert that these issues can be dealt with only on a case-by-case basis. Hence they deny the legitimacy of claims made by people who act as spokespersons for communities. I am not making a judgment here; I am describing a strategy. As this essay pointed out earlier, claims to speak on behalf of a community can also involve denying the interests of segments of that community. But the insistence that the issues are individual and not the community's also denies the claimed interests of the community. The cases discussed in this volume are political contests; hence it should not be surprising that the means of conducting business is political.

A major contribution of Zolberg's essay is to show how assertions or denials of identities in museum-community relations are political processes. Museums are certifiers of taste and definers of cultures. As such, they are intimately involved in the task of defining identities and setting up schemes that classify and relate cultural identities. The way that museums are inserted in civil society and their power to produce cultural values make them an integral part of the processes by which cultures are placed into hierarchies that define them as superior or inferior to one another.

This need not be the fate of museums. They are also repositories of knowledge and objects; some do represent the range of human creativity. Even though the collections museums make are not comprehensive (how could they be?), they can strive to contain and exhibit the range of human communities, capacities, and artistic achievement. This task involves not just seeking out objects and cultural materials that are representative or stylistically central. It also involves engaging in dialogue with people who stand apart from their communities or who form different communities, and it involves seeking out objects and knowledge that can be used to deny essentializing assertions of identity. Most of all, however, the tasks of museums involve questioning their own claims about identity and engaging in serious and systematic dialogue with other points of view.
NOTES

1. Public culture is a term coined to describe forms of popular culture and more formal institutions such as museums. See Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, "Why Public Culture?" Public Culture 1, no. 1 (1988), 5–9. (In the introduction to part 2 of this volume Steven Lavine refers to the literature on civic culture. This debate has nothing to do with the writings about public culture.)


6. This raises the question of how to define authority. This is discussed in parts 2 and 3 of this volume, and extensively in the proceedings of the previous conference, published as Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991). Multiple parties, each claiming authority, compete to control the content of exhibitions. Museums experiment with sharing power and means of distributing authority. Yet how authority is manifested in museums has not been investigated. In "The Fate of Tipppoo’s Tiger: A Critical Account of Ethnographic Display" (Los Angeles: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1991), Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz begin to unpack museum assertions of authority by distinguishing between "ethnographic authority," which is exhibition-specific, and "cultural authority," which relates to the implicit claims museums make about their role in civil society.

7. A major difference between Appadurai and Breckenridge’s argument and this introduction is that they believe that the subjective museum experience is far more collective in India than in the United States, while I have argued that the viewing experience tends to be inherently private. I think Appadurai and Breckenridge are focusing more on the shared criteria in terms of which exhibitions are viewed rather than the actual act of viewing, which is what I believe is a private experience. But there are cultural differences between India and some Western settings. In the West art museums in particular invoke the sacred qualities of the church, while in India far more interaction is apparent in museum visits. But even in the West there are certain kinds of visits where the audience is inherently interactive. The hierarchically organized tour is one such kind of visit, and certainly parent-child visits are occasions for teaching and interaction. My point is that even interaction is only an approximate way of expressing an interior experience: viewing. There is always a space between what we experience and how we express it.


10. See Lyotard’s famous definition of the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984], xxv).


12. The National Museum of Natural History was concerned enough to pull the most offensive picture, a blurry photograph of an African child that made him look like a monster. See Gorilla: Struggle for Survival in the Virungas, photographs by Michael Nichols and essay by George Schaller, ed. Nan Richardson (New York: Aperture, 1989), 44–45.

13. For a discussion of the problems inherent in this view and the politics of festivals in general, see part 4 of Karp and Lavine, eds., Exhibiting Cultures, and Karp’s introductory essay in that section.

14. These reactions and assertions are discussed in Karp, "High and Low Revisited."