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"Tongue to Tongue." Cultural Empowerment and Civic Responsibility in a Collaborative and Non-Hierarchical Display

Introduction

The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin (Italy) has recently started to explore an innovative path of practice leading to inclusivity. Using the example of the pilot project "Tongue to Tongue. A Collaborative Exhibition," this paper will discuss how the Museum took part in the experimental task of challenging its own monologic voice and authority.

The project was promoted by the Museum of Anthropology and was based on an institutional partnership with the Centre for African Studies of Turin, the leading body, and HoldenArt, a cultural association committed to the application of storytelling techniques to heritage. The initiative was coordinated by the Turin City Council within the framework of MAP for ID – Museums as Places for Intercultural Dialogue (2007–2009), a wider project supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union.²

Based on a participatory process of cultural empowerment and an unprecedented collaboration between museum educators and a group of citizens from Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Italy, Morocco, Romania and Senegal, mainly working as cultural mediators, the project aimed to transform the Museum into a multivocal space of representation where the tongue of the museum (institutional, scientific and di-

dactic) engaged in a dialogue with the citizens' tongue (autobiographical, evocative and emotional). The title of the exhibition was inspired by a song by the Italian group Radiodervish.

The project provided an opportunity to experiment with a more inclusive poetics and politics of cultural representation in the Museum and explore its intercultural potential. Nevertheless, it also revealed the constraints and weaknesses implied in the process of incorporating these same issues into a sustainable institutional mission.

1 The Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin

Professor Giovanni Marro (1875–1952) is responsible for the founding of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. After taking part in digging campaigns in Egypt with the Italian Archaeological Mission as anthropologist, he brought to Turin an important collection made of archaeological remains, predynastic and dynastic mummies and osteological finds. The Museum was founded in 1926 upon this early core and later enriched with new collections, by Marro and his collaborators.

Currently, the Museum's holdings include varied collections, some rare and unique, organized by subject: primatological, anthropological, paleon-

¹The Introduction and the Conclusions were written by G. Mangiapane and A.M. Pecci; section 1 was written by G. Mangiapane; section 2 was written by A.M. Pecci. The authors are grateful to Laurie Kalb for her critical comments, English revision, and generous support in reading the paper.

For a more detailed description see www.mapforid.it (July 2012).

tological, photographic and ethnographic. The Museum has been closed since 1984 and is expected to move to the Anatomical Institutes of the University of Turin, adjacent to the Museum of Human Anatomy Luigi Rolando and the Museum of Criminal Anthropology Cesare Lombroso.

Notwithstanding the practical constraints imposed by an institutional move, the Museum runs ordinary institutional activities including research, teaching, documentation, conservation, and display. As a university museum, the institution is considered a scientific unit of the University hence it mainly carries out research on osteological findings, from different archaeological sites and on the Egyptian and South American mummies collections with the help of new techniques. Furthermore, the staff practices study and management of the anthropological collections; several lines of research have been undertaken to expand knowledge of the preservation of the biological remains and the museum team is developing low-invasive methods for rapid assessment and monitoring of tissues.

The Museum regularly makes loans to other scientific museums and institutions for their exhibitions and mounts temporary exhibitions within its still accessible areas. Since 1997, several exhibitions have shown the importance of a heritage which has been hidden for decades.³ During these events, guided visits lead a wide audience – including school groups, families and visitors – to explore collections otherwise only available to students from the University.

Because the Museum of Anthropology developed largely around its collections, considering them rather than its audience as the cornerstone of its existence, it is now working to assume a new social responsibility toward its collection and its mission.

For these reasons, the project we discuss here offered the Museum an opportunity to

- develop its education staff's intercultural competencies through participatory planning;
- reinterpret ethnographic collections from an intercultural perspective;
- conceive and realize an exhibition based on a collaborative process in place during all phases, from the concept to training, from the selection of objects to their display, from communication of the event to the analysis of the achieved results;
- experiment with a shared practice involving citizens in a process of cultural (re)appropriation and interpretation of tangible and intangible heritages;
- adopt storytelling techniques in order to: a) give participants the chance to take advantage of the heritage in terms of cultural (self)representation; b) perform dialogic narrative routes aimed at introducing a pluralistic approach to "read" the exhibits and collections through different points of view;
- re-contextualize collections and produce, with secondary schools, an innovative proposal of heritage education starting from an intercultural perspective;⁴ and
- attract a more diverse audience to the Museum.

The Museum's ethnographic collections allowed us to look at the cultural contexts within which they were produced from different perspectives in order to detect the complexity and dynamics

³ RABINO MASSA, Emma/Boano, Rosa: Il Museo di Antropologia ed Etnografia. In: Giacobini, Giacomo (ed.): La Memoria della Scienza. Musei e Collezioni dell'Università di Torino. Turin 2003, pp. 165–176.

⁴ PECCI, Anna Maria/MANGIAPANE, Gianluigi: 'Expographic Storytelling': the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin as a Field of Dialogic Representation. In: The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum, 3/1 (2010), pp. 141–152.

of the concept of "culture," to challenge the ideas of "belonging" and "exclusion," and to go beyond the idea of "our culture" as opposed to the "others' culture," according to the European project statement.⁵

The ethnographic collections consist of artefacts coming from different parts of the world ranging from Equatorial Africa (Belgian Congo of the early 20th century) to Oceania; Western countries to Japan; the Eastern Alps to Romania; from North America (the regions inhabited by Inuit populations) to Brazil. The objects which were selected for the project are sculptures, baskets and some arrows belonging to the Equatorial Africa Collection; musical instruments (a drum and a flute) and a tea box belonging to the

Chinese and Japanese collections; a traditional Mongolian head covering; a mask belonging to the Aztec and Mayan collection from Mexico; and a wedding case, a cradle and a spoon from the Alpine collections from Northern Italy.

Taking part in the project signified a great innovation for the institution, since it allowed for a renewed interdisciplinary approach towards scientific heritage. The goal was to see objects not as mere instruments of knowledge but as a means for increasing intercultural understanding, thus contributing to social inclusion and cohesion. In brief, we envisaged the Museum as an innovative setting, opening the opportunity for it to assume a social role, far from that of being a simple "box."

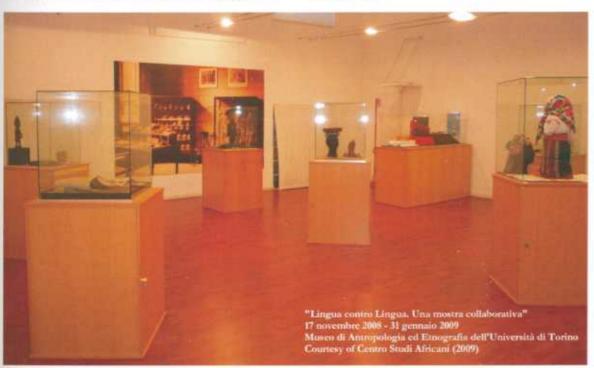


Fig. 1: Tongue to Tongue. A Collaborative Exhibition. Overview (photo: courtesy of Centre for African Studies of Turin 2009).

^{*}See www.mapforid.it (July 2012).

2 Tongue to Tongue. A Collaborative Exhibition (17th of November 2008 – 31st of January 2009)

At the heart of the project was a Training Course for Mediators of Intercultural Heritages which culminated in the collaborative exhibition "Tongue to Tongue." Trained mediators, recognized as new interpreters of the Museum's heritage, were in fact involved in the planning and mounting of the exhibition in cooperation with the museum staff and an architect/exhibition designer.

The exhibition consisted of a range of nine autobiographical showcases (fig. 1), very similar to installations, which were not inscribed in a thematic framework but rather juxtaposed in order to create a range of different stories whose singularity consisted of the complete absence of an explaining textual apparatus and the fundamental presence of a cultural mediator and a museum educator as "storytellers." The traditional guided visit was therefore replaced with a dialogic narrative route performed by the mediator/author of the showcase and a museum educator who exchanged knowledge and perspectives about the objects selected from the ethnographic collections.

The project engaged two different target groups. For the training course, the group of cultural mediators, mainly migrants belonging to first and second generations, and the Museum education staff participated. Second, local students attending the last two years of secondary school, the general public, and non-visitors including youths, migrants, were the target for the exhibition. This choice corresponded directly to the expected objectives and outcomes defined by the European Lifelong Learning Programme. Pre-

paratory activities were planned for secondary schools but due to space limitations we are not able to discuss the educational side of the project here.

2.1 A Dialogic Methodology

Starting with an anthropological notion of cultural heritage as a social construction and a relational and negotiating process of meanings, we adopted a dynamic, dialogic and process-oriented perspective for working with both objects and people, tangibility and intangibility. Our practice was informed by Clifford's theory of the museum as a "contact zone"6 concerning the power relations implicit in museum collections. This theoretical choice enabled us to explore new ways to re-interpret collections and create new purposes and meanings of the Museum through an articulated collaborative process that ranged from the selection of objects to the conception of exhibits and from the writing and performing of narrative routes to the educational activities conducted with students and visitors.

Following Sandell', we understood cultural inclusion as an opportunity and a challenge that museums have recently started to meet in three areas – cultural access, participation, representation and communication. On the practical level, we developed intercultural dialogue as an interactive and bi-directional process, not only an end to reach, implying a sharing of skills, knowledge, and responsibility that contributed to the conception and realization of the exhibition.

Finally, we assumed heritage mediation both as a process of cultural empowerment for participants – not exclusively migrants but, more generally and democratically, citizens – and an exploration

⁶ CLIFFORD, James: Museums as Contact Zones. In: Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century. Cambridge (MA) and London 1997, pp. 188–219.

SANDELL, Richard: Museums and the Combating of Social Inequality: Roles, Responsibilities, Resistance. In: SANDELL, Richard (ed.): Museums, Society, Inequality, London and New York 2002, pp. 3–23.

of the intercultural potential of the Museum's ethnographic collections. These last assumptions found practical translation and application in the Training Course for Mediators of Intercultural Heritages and in the development of an "expographic storytelling" technique.

2.2 Participation as Empowerment: the Training Course for Mediators of Intercultural Heritages

The Training Course for Mediators of Intercultural Heritages was primarily planned as a process of cultural empowerment aimed to

- promote awareness of the right of every citizen to take part in public culture;
- develop social and cultural responsibility;
- enable an exchange and transfer of competencies and skills; and
- explore and build the power of a voice and a language that give new sense and meaning to heritage.

In other words, we understood empowerment in terms of personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship. It was an increasing personal autonomy and agency that participants achieved through the transfer, acquisition and development of knowledge and of personal and social skills.

The course was addressed to both cultural mediators and to museum educators, thus engaging subjects bringing diverse professional knowledge and competencies to share and exchange. A non-hierarchical teamwork approach was in fact adopted in order to facilitate and enact an interactive process of skills transfer and authority sharing involving both trainers (i.e. the storytelling techniques' tutor and the architect/exhibition designer, among others) and trainees. The training course gave all participants possi-

bilities of informed choices by exposing, discussing and trying different theories and practices of intercultural mediation. The ideas of empowerment and self-expression were central for the preparation process, which was based around the collection of oral testimony and histories and the adoption of storytelling as a mediation tool.

Storytelling was used to empower participants with a voice and therefore provide them with the means to explore their past and present, possibly focusing on their migratory experience; (re)construct their own histories and biographies within the framework of a shared discussion and interpretation; and become agents of their own subjectivity.

Each mediator was free to choose from the ethnographic collections the objects with which they identified culturally and/or emotionally. The Museum's ethnographic collections were used to bring out a range of perspectives that addressed aspects of the past and contemporary lives of mediators. Objects were chosen either because of their being particularly illustrative of symbolic and social functions (e.g. the sculptures and baskets belonging to the African collection, the musical instruments belonging to the Chinese and Japanese collections, or a wedding case belonging to the Alpine collections from Northern Italy) or by virtue of their being aesthetically attractive (e.g. the head covering belonging to the Asian collection). Some were selected on the basis of distinctively striking features (e.g. the Chinese tea box carrying a peculiar ideographic inscription). Every single choice was, in the end, driven by the power of objects to evoke cultural traces and inspire memories and stories. For our project's purposes, people were in fact invited to participate as individuals, not as representatives of ethnic groups or communities,

thus disengaging objects from the prevailing rationale of "cultural representation."

Such a methodological space of freedom was supported by a museological principle pertaining to the *muséologie de la rupture* practiced by Jacques Hainard at the Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel, which states that objects should be considered as "pretexts" since

objects are not exposed for their own sake, but because they are inserted in a discourse, because they are becoming arguments of a history that is putting into perspective one or another of their characteristics, be they aesthetic, functional or symbolic. (...) (They are) in the service of a theoretical subject, of a discourse or of a story and not the contrary,

according to the *Principes d'exposition* stated by curators at the Musée d'Ethnographie de Neuchâtel.⁸ The adoption of this principle enabled every participant to use personal and autobiographical experiences; perform subjective identities; and express the evocative potential of each object, its "cultural resonance."

The selection was followed by the planning of dialogic narrative routes. Creative writing workshops encouraged participants to find ways to express their biographical experiences in order to translate them in "expographic" terms and then perform them orally during their dialogic narrative routes in the Museum. Some of the mediators decided to bring personal objects during collective discussions around the key themes of their tales (e.g. music, rites, ancients, language, traditions), and sometimes in response to new ideas and suggestions generated by the storytelling tutor and/or the architect. Hence, they brought in a number of objects of relevance to them – objets d'affection – such as special photographs, clothes, travel souvenirs, and books. The final result consisted of a non-hierarchical display, a space in which the act of juxtaposing museum pieces with personal objects and the blurring of the boundaries between tangible and intangible heritages created a new arena of meanings leading to a re-interpretation and re-contextualization of collections.

For example, Abderrahim Benradi wrote and performed a tale about the use of music in the rite of circumcision and, more generally, as an instrument of socialization and mediation among socio-cultural differences. He conceived a story that was inspired by his childhood memories and his life in a Moroccan village and that was "built" around a selection of musical instruments belonging to the Chinese and Japanese collections of the Museum. He also decided to show two personal objects, a hat that boys wear for the circumcision ritual and a picture of his son, a sort of alter ego of the main character of Benradi's tale (fig. 2).

During the narrative route performed by Benradi, the museum educator embodied the scientific and didascalic tongue of classification. His interventions consisted of precise descriptions of the iconography, symbology and social uses of musical instruments in different cultural contexts, thus integrating the personal and emotional tongue of the mediator (fig. 3).

Through the acknowledgement of the objects' polysemy, cultural mediators and museum educators finally succeeded in revealing both the biographical contexts – the lives, worlds, and histories of which the objects were part and which gave them meaning – and the formal/scientific qualities of the ethnographic collections.

⁸ See www.men.ch.

⁹ GREENBLATT, Steven: Resonance and Wonder. In: KARP, Ivan/Lavine, Steven D. (eds.): Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, Washington and London 1991, p. 42–55.



Fig. 2: Abderrahim Benradi's showcase. (photo: courtesy of Centre for African Studies of Turin 2009).

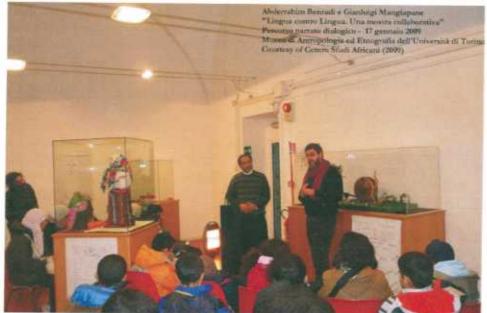


Fig. 3: Abderrahim Benradi and Gianluigi Mangiapane: a dialogic narrative route (photo: courtesy of Centre for African Studies of Turin 2009).

Mediators, who accessed the collections, re-interpreted them, and co-curated the exhibition, acted as cultural producers and interpreters, delivering a unique experience of intercultural mediation, consisting of reflexivity, authorship, and emotions. Museum educators, as bearers of an institutional expertise, brought in their knowledge in the fields of research, museum and collections' history, conservation, classification and museum education. The interplay among these agents of meaning contributed to the creation of a process of active citizenship based on the temporary removal of cultural barriers to the access and interpretation of heritage.

With the acknowledgement, by the Museum staff, of the responsibility, right, and ability of every citizen to take part in the cultural life of society, the institution promoted on the one hand social engagement and involvement, and on the other the construction of a sense of identity and belonging through the re-appropriation of the ethnographic collections. Such a role of "facilitator" revealed the social agency of the Museum, its capacity to shape, not simply reflect, a commitment to cultural diversity as well as a principle of civic responsibility.

2.3 "Expographic Storytelling" as a Means of De-Hierarchisation

The project created a process in which mediators generated and shared new meanings; established priorities; specified objectives; developed tactics of representation and contributed their experience. Andrea Perin, the architect, shared with them his knowledge, playing the threefold role of exhibition designer, facilitator and "translator" of their expertise. While offering advice associated with themes, spatial

organization, objects' choice, and so on, he opened possibilities for action that might not have been otherwise imagined by participants. His approach was aimed to raise the mediators' awareness of their choices¹⁰ and was guided by a collaborative process wherein the group of mediators would be the "curator."

A transversal approach and a multilayered process of cultural representation enabled an interaction of storytelling techniques with exhibition planning, making the elaboration of the narrative plot proceed together with the display, creating a correspondence of meaning between the two levels and languages of representation. By coining the expression "expographic storytelling," we intend to stress the role of a sort of "third" language, made not of the synthesis but the coexistence of multiple voices. In this instance, the curatorial work was based on an exchange of knowledge and skills which empowered two parties (mediators and museum educators), encouraged cross-cultural understanding, and resulted in a shared curatorship.

The exhibition had an interdisciplinary approach, whereby traditional classification systems were broken down in order to bring ethnographic collections and objets d'affection together in a multilayered narrative structure. As architect Perin states, the placement of personal objects beside museum objects – in order to establish an equal relationship between them – was intended neither to provide an aesthetic experience nor to reconstruct a cultural context. Instead, it enabled every object to attain meaning from a relationship with other objects thus allowing for a "museographic de-hierarchisation" that conceived of museum objects and personal objects as equally worthy of display by virtue of their social values.¹¹

¹⁰ PERIN, Andrea: Allestimento senza Gerarchia. In: Antropologia Museale 20/21 (2008), p. 38.

HAINARD, Jacques: Le Trou: un Concept Utile pour Penser les Rapports entre Objet et Mémoire. In: DEBARY, Octave/Turgeon, Laurier (eds.): Objets et Mémoires. Paris 2007, pp. 127–138; p. 133.

The "expographic storytelling" thus allowed mediators and museum educators to explore and (re)enact part of the social relations that connected (and/or connect) objects with people. As such, the collaboration produced "a shift from displaying the taxonomy to telling 'stories' or transmitting 'messages', (...) 'Stories' and 'messages', rather than taxonomies, then, are the museums' new fictions. (...) The task of interpretation (...) is to rewrite the fictions inherent in the collections."

The exhibition's non-hierarchical dimension was also determined by the absence of a textual apparatus (e.g. text panels, object labels and captions), thus escaping from a politics of representation "conceived in terms of a hierarchical relationship between texts and material objects where texts dominate in the constitution of knowledge."13 The incorporation of voices in the display contributed, instead, to the idea of giving equal importance and visibility to material culture and orality, tangible and intangible heritage. In other words, the two forms of representation and interpretation, visual and verbal, coexisted and co-produced meanings. Finally, the collaborative display aimed to reconfigure the hierarchical relationship between "self" and "other."14 Through the inclusion of subjective points of view and contemporary biographies, the exhibition presented narratives of identities, such as migration stories, that, being themselves in flux and shifting, question our own notions of identity.

Such an engagement reveals the social value of the Museum of Anthropology as it contributes to the constantly shifting cultural identity of individuals and the process of citizenship. ¹⁵ In allowing its users to (re)construct their identities, the institution acts as a facilitator rather than as a mechanistic set of functions such as conservation, display or education. ¹⁶ Curatorial work plays a fundamental role within this experimental transformation as it recognizes the interplay of objects, people and society in terms of a more integrated and culturally relative approach. Eventually, it reveals that the social role of the Museum is interconnected to the social dimension of curating. ¹⁷

Conclusions: Building Bridges, Shifting Boundaries

The project's outcomes serve to highlight a possible way in which the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin can contribute to combating social exclusion, promoting equality of opportunity and pluralist values. The Museum has demonstrated to be socially responsible by virtue of the evidence that "social responsibility requires an acknowledgement of the meaning-making potential of the museum and an imperative to utilize that to positive social ends." However, our conclusions, rather than placing special emphasis on this achievement, intend to focus on the institu-

¹² MacDonald, Sharon/Silverstone, Roger; Rewriting the Museums' Fictions: Taxonomies, Stories and Readers. In: Cultural Studies, 4/2 (1990), pp. 176–191; p. 181.

14 HALLAM (note 13), p. 271.

16 NEWMAN/McLean (note 15), p. 64.

18 SANDELL (note 7), p. 19.

¹³ HALLAM, Elizabeth: Texts, Objects and 'Otherness': Problems of Historical Process in Writing and Displaying Cultures. In: HALLAM, Elizabeth/STREET, Brian V. (eds.): Cultural Encounters. Representing 'Otherness'. London and New York 2000, pp. 260–283; p. 270.

¹⁵ NEWMAN, Andrew/McLean, Fiona: Architectures of Inclusion: Museums, Galleries and Inclusive Communities. In: SANDELL, Richard (ed.): Museums, Society, Inequality. London and New York 2002, pp. 56–68; p. 64.

¹⁷ KREPS, Christina: Curatorship as Social Practice. In: Curator 46/3 (2003), pp. 311–323.

tional boundaries that, instead of dissolving, only started to *shift* towards a greater commitment to civic dialogue.

The European project MAP for ID provided the Museum with an exceptional opportunity to raise its profile by means of an approach that engages with a socially responsible mission based on appreciation of certain values, such as intimacy, depth and interconnectedness, that, as Janes and Conaty argue, are largely absent or unspoken in contemporary museum work. 19 The Museum demonstrated how it is possible to incorporate these values in the building of new kinds of relationships, both social and symbolic, with people and objects. University collections, rather than being used in a static manner, primarily to enhance institutional prestige, were used to enact both cultural empowerment and intercultural dialogue in a collaborative and multi-vocal process. This challenged the Museum staff's comfort zone of working within disciplinary boundaries and role divisions. In this respect, the Museum produced a temporary "blurring of the boundaries,"20 both on the content side and on the interpretive side, undertaking a gradual shift from acting for and about diverse cultures to the offering of its voice as one among many. While testing new ways for inclusive mediation of collections, the Museum has begun to rethink its traditional approach to exhibition planning and cultural representation in order to focus instead

on the social process of citizenship and of heritage mediation from an intercultural perspective. While the institution has started to promote a social role – revealing its awareness and competence to engage with issues relating to civic empowerment, such as power, trust, and agency²¹ –, insufficient financial resources limit its potential for social transformation. As a consequence, the Museum's battle against social inequality is still confined to its education work.

Because the inclusive and collaborative approach is still not embedded in institutional politics, the Museum faces now a challenge of sustaining change once the pilot project ends. Although the institutional transformation requires a long time to mature and will need effort to sustain itself, the project's outcomes seem to provide seeds of a greater civic engagement.

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²⁰ HEUMANN Gurian, Elaine: A Blurring of the Boundaries. In: CORSANE, Gerard (ed.): Heritage, Museums, and Galleries. An Introductory Reader. London and New York 2005, pp. 71–77; p. 71.

¹⁹ JANES, Robert R./CONATY, Gerald Thomas: Introduction. In: JANES, Robert R./CONATY, Gerald Thomas (eds.): Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility. Alberta 2005, pp. 1–17; p. 8.

²⁴ THELEN, David: Learning Community. Lessons in Co-Creating the Civic Museum. In: Corsane, Gerard (ed.): Heritage, Museums, and Galleries. An Introductory Reader. London and New York 2005, pp. 333–338; p. 333.



The ICOM-ICME Annual Meeting in 2011 was held in Germany, hosted by the University of Bamberg/ European Ethnology in collaboration with other cultural institutions. "Dissolving Boundaries" has been discussed during the conference on many levels of museological approaches and was experienced by visiting relevant museums, exhibitions and memorial sites.

This volume includes fifteen articles from all over the world. They give an access to the museological debate on borders, borderlines and delimination in politics, society and culture. Changing museum concepts in a changing world and new approaches to collections as memory storage in a multicultural society are accompanied by obviously involved visitors. They all require new ways of cultural mediation.

Der Band enthält eine deutsche Zusammenfassung der Beiträge zur Überwindung von politischen, sozialen und kulturellen Grenzziehungen aus museologischer Sicht sowie eine ergänzende Grundlegung des Themas, ebenfalls in deutscher Sprache.

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