
NOTES AND REVIEWS

CULTURAL TRAUMA AND DIVERSITY IN MUSEUMS:
A REPORT FROM SÃO PAULO*

INTRODUCTION

In summer 2017 researchers from the Institute of Cultural Research, and the Department of Archival Studies at the University of Tartu, conducted fieldwork in São Paulo under the auspices of a European Commission funded project titled Social Performance, Cultural Trauma and the Re-establishing of Solid Sovereignities (SPECTRESS, 2014–2017). SPECTRESS was a network of nine international university partners, five from Europe (Ireland, Germany, Poland, Croatia and Estonia), two from Asia (India, Japan), one from South America (Brazil), and the USA brought together to research post-traumatic national self-perception in an era that celebrates the global. SPECTRESS as a scholarly exchange program of partners from largely 'post-traumatic' states aimed at understanding the negotiation of 'cultural trauma' and 'new sovereignities' in the 20th and 21st centuries. To document the inscriptions of the 'post-traumatic' in forms of public performance was one of the aims of our stay in São Paulo.¹

The theoretical framework of cultural trauma gained significance in understanding political, social and cultural processes in South America after the 1980s (Yovanovich and Huras 2010). As Jeffrey Alexander

(2004: 1) argues, “[c]ultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways”. As a theoretical concept, cultural trauma denotes meaningful relationships between (past) events, structures, perceptions and actions. Insofar as the actors identify the cause of trauma, they assume a moral responsibility for it and therefore re-define their social relationships. For Piotr Sztompka (2004) trauma is an appropriate term for many of the shared experiences of social becoming and peculiar types of social change such as revolution, market collapse, war, collapse of an empire, radical economic reform, forced migration, genocide, terrorism, revisionist interpretations of national heroic tradition, etc. We focused on what the difficult past is called and what kind of social becoming is presented in museum exhibitions as a result of negotiating difficult past experiences. How does a country like Brazil, with its history of migration, slavery, and military dictatorship, deal with cultural trauma and how does it approach cultural diversity in museums?

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MUSEUMS AS SITES OF SOCIAL BECOMING

Sharon Macdonald (1995: 2) has described contemporary museums as “key loci of our times”: “[t]hrough their displays and their day-to-day operations they inevitably raise questions about knowledge and power, about identity and difference, and about permanence and transience”. Museums have the possibility to contest difficult pasts and to present different narratives about the past. Through their exhibitions and related activities, museums can assist communities to learn to live with conflict, with the other and with diversity, and to build up a positive identity.

São Paulo is considered the financial centre of Brazil, but the city has also a very vivid cultural life and diverse landscape of museums. The most prominent cultural event is probably the São Paulo art biennale, founded in 1951, which is held in Parque de Ibirapuera. São Paulo is also home to art museums like the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), which was founded in 1947 and has a home at central promenade at Avenida Paulista. Another prominent art museum is the Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM), which is also among the oldest modern art museums in Latin America. However, the national history museum and national museum are located in Rio de Janeiro. When browsing through the list of museums in São Paulo we selected museums which we thought would address the issue of difficult pasts and deal with the questions of immigration, slavery and Brazilianness.

Since the last decades of the 20th century there has been a constant growth of museums in Brazil. In southern states like São Paulo, one can particularly observe museums that are the results of the demands of the local population. São Paulo received the majority of immigrants from Italy, Portugal and Spain, as well as from Central and Eastern Europe and Japan between the 1880s and 1920s. Museums have gained impor-

tance in maintaining cultural identities within communities of former immigrants. The constitution of local identities can also be seen as part of a global phenomenon constituted by the weakening of centralised cultural policies on the part of the nation state. The end of the authoritarian military dictatorship in Brazil in 1985 adds a further dimension. Furthermore, the new museums correspond to the economic and political growth of local government in São Paulo. Following developments in the museum field during the 1990s, Brazilian researchers have been critical of museological practices in Brazilian museums. Conventional exhibition strategies and being distanced from the public has been noted not only in national but also in state and local museums. (Santos 2001: 79–80) However, as we learned on site, São Paulo museums, at least the major ones, have recently undergone a significant renewal of their exhibits. In addition, a surprisingly large segment of the population has free access to state museums as compared to community museums.

Our key field sites in São Paulo were as follows: the Immigration Museum of the State of São Paulo (<http://www.museudaimigracao.org.br/en/>, in Mooca-Bras); Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (<http://pinacoteca.org.br>, in Luz); the Football museum (<http://www.museudofutebol.org.br>, at Pacaembu); Museu Afro Brasil (Museu-AfroBrasil, <http://www.museuafrobrasil.org.br>, in Ibirapuera); Museu Histórico da Imigração Japonesa no Brasil (<http://www.museubunkyo.org.br>, in Liberdade) and the Jewish Historical Archive in Brazil as a part of the (future) São Paulo Jewish Museum.

Unfortunately, another museum that would have been very interesting for our research purposes, the Paulista Museum at the University of São Paulo, was closed for renovation. Nevertheless, in-depth documentation of the museums we selected provided us with rich material on difficult pasts and diverse identities in museums for future analysis.

When visiting the museums, we combined visual documentation with narrative and discourse analysis and with analysis of frame and transmediality in order to build up a small archive of documentation for later study.

THE IMMIGRATION MUSEUM OF THE STATE OF SÃO PAULO

Our first visit brought us to the Immigration Museum of the State of São Paulo. The permanent exhibition was newly re-opened in May 2014, and used many innovative interactive methods and resources. The main aim of the museum is to display the experiences, memories and identities of the people who have arrived in Brazil at different times. In the museum, (im)migration is presented as a universal process that has been taking place since the beginning of humankind. At the same time, the visitor gets the impression that central to the exhibition is the migration of the 19th and 20th centuries through which the 'Brazilian story' was created.

The central place given to 19th- and 20th-century immigration is connected to the building itself. The museum is in the former immigration centre (established 1885) where new immigrants from Port of Santos arrived: the former dining room and sleeping hall are integrated into the exhibition to tell stories about everyday life at the immigration centre, touching on immigrants' hopes and fears. Periods prior to the creation of the Immigration Centre were presented through the discourses of colonialism and slavery. The exhibition itself starts with a ship made of bricks, an installation by the artist Nuno Ramos that references Primo Levi's famous memoir *If This Is a Man* (1947). The installation makes a strong reference to holocaust and trauma discourse.

However, the exhibition itself stresses Brazilianness (all are Brazilians) rather than trauma. To be sure, trauma is not entirely absent in a space dedicated to topics such



Photo 1. Installation by Nuno Ramos at the entrance to the Immigration Museum's permanent exhibition. Photo by Ene Kõresaar.

as leaving one's home and family, being deprived of home and freedom as a result of colonisation, etc. There is, for instance, a powerful section displaying departure from Europe at the beginning of the 20th century: ribbons connecting loved ones on ship and shore breaking as the ship departs, the last sight from the ship of people left behind... Traumatic experiences are to be read in the exhibition as a part of the trajectory of becoming Brazilian. Coming from a European trauma-centred memory culture ourselves, it was intriguing to observe how predominance is given to narratives of universal human migration and integration, rather than a trauma narrative. This was especially vivid with respect to indigenous peoples, whose history of oppression was rather downplayed in comparison to the history of European colonisation and slavery. All three main historical lines of movement in addition to the 19th- and 20th-century immigration to Brazil were linked at the exhibition and formed an "array of sounds, tastes and colours" (from an exhibition text), the motifs representing the cultural diversity of São Paulo and Brazil today.



Photo 2. Letter boxes: exhibiting the fears and longing for home of immigrants in a former dormitory. Immigration Museum. Photo by Ene Kõresaar.

The exhibition uses many innovative solutions that really help to mediate the (im)migration stories. Oral history is cleverly integrated into the exhibition: the experiences of immigrants are staged in several separate 'boxes' so that many visitors can listen to the stories simultaneously. In addition, in one box at least two people can have the same experience at the same time. Furthermore, the immigration stories that are told are represented thematically, so one can choose a topic to listen to, such as travel across the Atlantic or adapting to new food in the southern hemisphere. The museum also presents contemporary migration stories and continues to actively deal with current processes, showing the diversity of today's São Paulo.



Photo 3. The making of multicultural São Paulo at the Immigration Museum. Photo by Ene Kõresaar.

PINACOTECA DO ESTADO DE SÃO PAULO

Our next visit brought us to Pinacoteca, the art museum of São Paulo, where academic art was presented together with contemporary art. Throughout the exhibition the question what does it mean to be Brazilian was posed. The idea of the exhibition was to show that Brazilianness can be defined (and constituted) through art. The curators had combined academic art and contemporary art in the same room, the latter dealing with difficult issues relating to the past. The curators asked questions about the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–1985) in connection with a picture of Che Guevara (artwork by Claudio Tazzi, born in 1944), for example, “do you have any memories of, or know any stories about, the period of civil–military dictatorship in Brazil? What are they?”

The art display in Pinacoteca resonated well with the main narratives of the Immigration Museum in how it presented the formation of a visual repertoire on Brazil and the emergence of the integration narrative. The visitor is guided through the discovery of Brazilian nature as a marker of identity (with slaves as part of the ‘scenery’ as invisible Others), through later, critical reflections on slavery, to the attempts to “give a soul

to Brazil” (exhibition text) by incorporating the idea of cultural diversity: “mixed-race rustic folk” (exhibition text) into the centre of an identity project.



Photo 4. *Manual work, nature and miscegenation: a pedagogical representation of constructing Brazilian identity in the 20th century.*
Photo by Ene Kõresaar.

MUSEU AFRO BRAZIL

The expectations before visiting the Museu Afro Brasil were high. Prior to the opening of the museum in Ibirapuera Park in 2004, the representation of people of African descent in Brazilian museums has received lots of criticism. Myrian Santos (2005: 60–61) has argued that the focus on traumatic experiences of violence and self-destructive behaviour of black slaves at a museum “reproduces traumatic situations and compulsive behaviour in the present”. In 2005 Santos hoped that the new African museum in São Paulo, led by Emanuel Araújo, an Afro Brazilian painter and a former director of the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, would change the way Africans are portrayed in the museums. According to her, Araújo’s goal was to open a museum where reflexive thinking is at the centre, aiming “at the preservation of black memory and at the con-

struction of black people’s cultural history in order to promote their self-esteem” (ibid.: 51). It could be said that Araújo, the curator and director of the museum, has been very successful with the museum concentrating on the construction on Afro Brazilian cultural history and heritage. During our visit a temporary exhibition was opened (titled *Design e Tecnologia no Tempo da Escravidão*), which was curated by Araújo and dedicated to African material culture. At the centre of that display were the artefacts that were used in everyday life and on the plantations during slavery. The temporary exhibition stressed the creative contribution of slaves as the avant-garde of everyday design concepts.



Photo 5. *Telling the story of the creative everyday under slavery in the Museum of AfroBrazil.*
Photo by Ene Kõresaar.

Overall, however, the impression from the museum was quite eclectic. The otherwise generous space of the museum (located in the Pavilion Padre Manuel da Nóbrega, designed by Oscar Niemeyer) was filled with a vast variety of objects that showed attention to the everyday, to religion and to heritage. In addition, contemporary Brazilian art was also very well integrated into the exhibition. The contemporary art section dealt with the question of the contemporary identity of Afrobrazilians. Additionally, their role in resistance to slavery and participation in different wars was thematised, thus actualising Afrobrazilian political agency. Unfortunately, the museum labels were available only in Portuguese, so the context provided by the museum was generally lost on us; the museum has developed an app in English, but it did not work on our devices. We were lucky to be accompanied by Tais Leite de Moura from the University of São Paulo, who occasionally translated for us as well as, more importantly, providing valuable context for the displayed objects. We were able to learn, from her experience, about generational differences in practicing religion. She also expanded our visitor experiences by explaining the contemporary lives of traditional objects and myths in Brazilian society (for example recent criticism of racism in using the folklore figure *Saci* in books used in education). Tais' taking the role as a mediator also demonstrated just how many dialogues the exhibition can initiate in visitors, how it provokes thoughts about the Afrobrazilian legacy that are often too habitual to be recognised in everyday life.

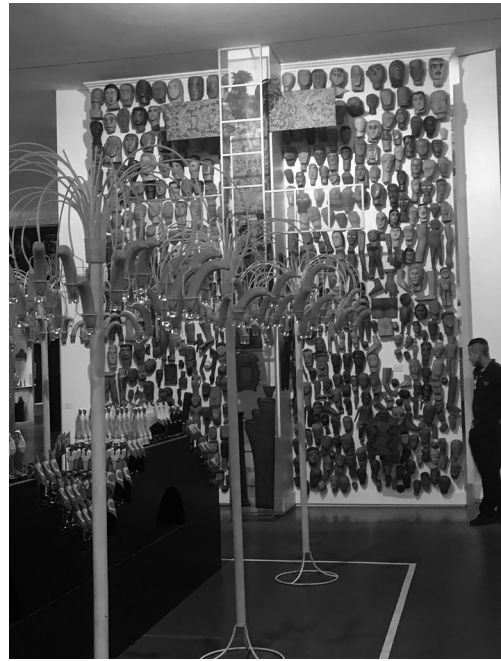


Photo 6. The making of Afrobrazilian heritage. Photo by Ene Kõresaar.

MUSEU HISTÓRICO DA IMIGRAÇÃO JAPONESA NO BRASIL

The Museum of Japanese Immigration to Brazil, in *Liberdade*, was dedicated to the history of the Japanese in Brazil – the largest community of Japanese outside Japan. It is the oldest exhibition we visited during our stay, opened in 1978 and continually renewed ever since. Museologically, it made a rather conventional impression compared to what we have experienced in other museums. The exhibition, spreading over three floors, was presented chronologically.



Photo 7. Work and art: exhibiting the everyday life of the Japanese community. Photo by Ene Kõresaar.

The focus of the exhibition is the spectrum of everyday life in the Japanese community since the first arrival of 790 immigrants aboard the *Kasato Maru* in 1908. It starts with the experience of alienation, with habits, food and everyday items totally different from those the immigrants had been used to. Throughout the exhibition the creativity of new immigrants was stressed, for example the invention of new tools, developing new agricultural products, building ground-breaking companies, etc. Hard work and striving for innovation were leit-motifs throughout the display, binding different themes. In addition, initiatives in cultural life and developing Japanese schools were covered. The Japanese community was deprived of some of their rights during World War II, and a section is dedicated to the painful experiences of that loss at the exhibition. The section covers the closure

of schools and the confiscation of a newly built community hospital. Contradictory attitudes among the Japanese community toward World War II are also thematised. All in all, the section dedicated to World War II – or just “war”, as it was called at the exhibition – stood out from other parts of the exhibition through its different design. This section is titled “The Tunnel”, a name that could be read as a metaphor for experiencing war trauma.

MUSEUM OF FOOTBALL

We also paid a visit to the Museum of Football. This museum surprised us: we did not expect to encounter representations of cultural trauma in a sports museum. Uruguay’s defeat of Brazil in the 1950 FIFA World Cup in Rio de Janeiro is represented in a very dramatic way. Elements representing trauma are used, such as a dark room (to which you are requested to enter silently), a dramatic heart beat and then, at the appropriate moment, total silence...



Photo 8. Trauma, loss and consolation: Brazil’s defeat by Uruguay in 1950. Photo by Ene Kõresaar.

Everywhere in the museum the emotionality of football was staged very well. We encountered the same ‘handwriting’ as at the Immigration Museum, and it turned out that the Football Museum was designed by the same designers, Felipe Tassara and Daniela Thomas.



Photo 9. An insight into the Museum of Football. Photo by Ene Kõresaar.

JEWISH ARCHIVE IN SÃO PAULO

Due to mysterious ways Google works sometimes, we did not initially find the Jewish Museum but knocked on the door of the Jewish Archive instead. Only there did we learn that the museum itself was still under construction and hopefully would be opened next year (at the time of publishing this report the project is still under construction). The Archive was situated in a remote building in Pinheiros, and the content was impressive. The Archive is a result of collecting work carried out since the 1960s. It contains a library of 8,000 books, a photo collection of 100,000 items, a music library of 6,500 tapes, a small video library, historical documents and objects, all of which have been donated by private individuals. Since

the 1980s female volunteers have recorded a total of 430 oral history interviews with Jewish community members. The Archive will not be entirely integrated into the museum, in the future serving as a community repository. The community has a close relationship with the Museum of Immigration and the Museum of Japanese Immigration.

CONCLUSION

We were impressed by the excellent design of most exhibitions and the good museological and pedagogical work underpinning it. All the best practices of current museology were applied at the Immigration Museum, at the Museum of Football, and at Pinocateca. The way museums in São Paulo have applied new exhibit strategies could be considered part of the democratisation of museums. The museums have managed to do justice to both collections and communication.

Departing from the theoretical concept of cultural trauma, we focused on how the difficult past was explained and what kind of ‘social becoming’ was presented in the museum exhibitions. The concept of cultural trauma proved to be a useful tool for analysis, since it is not only related to traumatic events (such as World War II in the memory of Japanese community) and long-term violence (like slavery), but also to ‘insidious trauma’ (Root 1992, cited in Brown 1995: 107), which is not physically threatening but is violent to the soul and the spirit. Cultural trauma also includes structural trauma, which is linked to the political and economic issues that are experienced daily (Craps 2013; Mengel and Bonzaga 2012). In this sense, the museological discourses on diversity and integration in São Paulo’s museums can be seen as a discourse of cultural trauma that links diverse and dissimilar events, structures, perceptions, and actions and creates a new sense of identity. In doing this, predominance is given to the positive meaning-making of belong-

ing to Brazilian society over that naming of, and dealing with, trauma. Trauma itself was represented in a rather subtle manner. To date, we do not have sufficient information on the history of museological representation in Brazil to provide an explanation for this. Would stressing positive identity markers over the negative traumatic past designate a new phase in museum representation in dealing with the difficult past, or would it mean avoiding detailing the past in fear of reproducing “those very same feelings of pain and shame in individuals of the present generation” (Santos 2005: 61)? The question remains open, and we conclude that in the contemporary museums of São Paulo, dealing with the difficult past is not a goal in itself, but rather is reflective of the meaning-making of the present in the laboratory of the future.

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Notes

1 We also participated in the Social Performances of Cultural Trauma conference and the Rebuilding of Solid Sovereignties and 12th Symposium of Irish Studies in South America, August 22–25, 2017 at the University of São Paulo.

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