

Borders and museums: Exclusion through social inclusion

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The study of borders involves an analysis of infrastructures and mechanisms that allow for their multiplication and crystallization, one of which is the museum. In this essay, I explain various ways in which museums can supposedly facilitate integration and social inclusion. At the same time, I question this theoretical capacity of museums to dispel borders by examining the relationship between exclusion and inclusion, as well as the intricacies and implications of social integration in the context of museums. In particular, I reflect on Tam-awan Village—a “living museum” envisioned to promote both the Cordilleran people’s welfare and indigenous culture—to present the seemingly inevitable reproduction of subjectivities and borders in postcolonial societies.

Keywords: border, museum, marginalization, exclusion, social inclusion, equality

Borders today transcend geographical margins and territorial edges as they increasingly occupy “the center of contemporary experience” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013, p. vii, 3). That said, the analysis of apparatuses that shatter or reinforce borders should go beyond the confines of the study of conventional geopolitics. This opens up diverse ways by which scholars can identify and examine socio-political spaces that produce, normalize, or crystallize new subjectivities. It is in this light that museums become relevant to the study of exclusion and inclusion.

Traditionally, museums are created to display a collection of things, capture and portray certain events, or convey messages to a group of people. They can exhibit people’s way of living, as well as collect, preserve, or interpret both their material culture and non-material culture. In the process of producing a narrative from these collections, museums decide whose and which artworks, sculptures, rituals, songs, or dances they will include. As such, it naturally produces boundaries and borders by silencing or creating an “other.” Historically, museums have also played a vital role in creating racial hierarchies (as in the case of colonial exhibitions) or normalizing “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) to promote the “superiority” of a particular population.

However, in recent years, there have been attempts to utilize museums as a mechanism for integration and social inclusion (see Sandell, 2000). An example of this is the Tam-awan Village, a “living museum” situated in the heart of the northern mountains of the Philippines. It was created to showcase Cordilleran (the collective term that pertains to the various minority groups in the mountain province region) customs and traditions and promote community awareness to tourists and locals alike (Kasilag, 1999). By exhibiting Cordilleran culture, the museum hopes that the said indigenous

people will be entirely accepted and integrated into Philippine society.[1] While it is indeed novel to advocate the welfare of those who have been discriminated for a long time, the role assumed by the museum in such endeavors, however, raises the question: is it genuinely possible for museums to socially integrate or include those they essentially exclude?

To answer this question, it is important to analyze the relationship between exclusion and inclusion. To do so, first, I look into the tendency (or the ability) of a museum to construct an “other” during its conceptualization. Next, I discuss the barriers to the realization of an inclusive museum, as well as ways by which scholars or museologists could break down these barriers. Finally, I explore the paradox of social inclusion, as I explain how museums’ promotion of the integration of a marginalized population can instead reproduce victimization and exclusion.

On social exclusion and inclusion: Solutions through museums

To briefly explain how “othering” happens in the conceptualization of museums, I draw connections between historiography and museology. Historians, like other social scientists, will always have biases regardless of their discipline’s attempt to project objectivity. Biases of historians will always be reflected in the sources they select (and silence), their periodization of the past, or signification, identification, and rationalization of historical turning points. The same is true with museologists or those who conceptualize museums; the museum’s purpose and role are determined by what its creators or founders select to preserve and exhibit. The manner by which they conduct the selection involves both the inclusion of cultures or people that they deemed important and the exclusion of those they considered worthless or insignificant.

Meanwhile, in museums that exhibit marginalized people and cultures, exclusion happens when museologists see themselves as the authority or “experts” entitled to create representations of the marginalized. In addressing this issue, Durose, Beebeejaun, Richardson, and Richardson (2012) have suggested measures, which museologists could also follow, to avoid “othering.” They posited that it is essential to conduct research in the framework of “interactive knowledge production” (p. 6). With “interactive knowledge production,” they meant a framework that is grounded in a “boundary space”—a space that surfaces when academics position themselves not as “experts” but instead as part of the community they study. Hence, their proposed term “co-production.” While Durose and others did not necessarily address the challenges surrounding the inherent tendency of museums to select and exclude, their call for “co-production” makes sense in the creation of a socially inclusive museum. Through “co-production,” the community can be allowed to participate and contribute to the conceptualization of their representation.

Although the said measure could theoretically foster inclusion in the narrative-production of a museum, the question concerning the possibility of generating a “boundary space” in practice still stands, especially in the contexts of museums that promote integration through the showcase of indigenous people’s cultural practices. In such a case, to tackle museums’ exercise of exclusion through inclusion, I refer to Richard Sandell’s study titled “Museums as Agents of Social Inclusion.” Sandell (2000) argues that museums, for countless years, have represented “institutionalized exclusion.” To determine how museums could shift their orientation from being exclusive to inclusive, he argued that it is imperative first to understand the manner by which museums exclude others.

Sandell (2000) mentions three dimensions where exclusionary practices of museums are manifested: first in the political, second in the social, and third in the economic. To concisely describe the exclusionary nature of museums, Sandell (2000, p. 407-8), quoting Ames (1997, p. 30), writes: "Museums are products of the establishment and authenticate the established or official values and image of a society in several ways, directly, by promoting and affirming the dominant values, and indirectly, by subordinating or rejecting alternate values." He explained that the exclusion of marginalized people happens when museums "fail to tell the stories of those groups and deny them access to its services through mechanisms of exclusion" (p. 408). He added that the non-representation within collections and displays, selective promotional targeting, and admission charges also promote exclusion. Thus, a museum "reflects the exclusion of groups from social systems" and "reinforces and perpetuates the exclusion of groups" (Sandell, 2000, p. 408).

Given this "institutionalized exclusion" that museums embody, in the next section, I follow Sandell's discussion on how museums can initiate integration. I also assess museums' capacity to initiate social inclusion by examining the case of Tam-awan Village.

Promoting the Cordilleran in Tam-awan Village: Assessing museums' capacity to advance social inclusion

The World Bank defines social inclusion as part of "the process of improving the terms for individuals and groups to take part in society" (Ortiz, 2017). Social inclusion aims "to empower poor and marginalized people to take advantage of burgeoning global and local opportunities" and "ensure that people have a voice in decisions which affect their lives and that they enjoy equal access to markets, services and political, social and physical spaces" (Ortiz, 2017). The United Nations defines social inclusion as "the process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights (United Nations, 2016)." In these two definitions, we can see two common threads which social inclusion addresses: (1) equality and (2) empowerment of the marginalized and the disadvantaged.

How then can social inclusion become central in museums? To answer this question, Sandell (2000, p. 410-11) proposed what an inclusive museum should endeavor to do:

...the inclusive museum, in representing the histories and culture of a minority group, will seek to increase its relevance to that audience and, in doing so, help to create access to its services. Although the goal is centred around cultural inclusion and increased access to the museum the initiatives might, in turn, have a positive impact on the wider causes and symptoms of social exclusion. So, the representation of that community's culture within the museum might affirm community identity, generate increased self-esteem amongst individuals and help to promote tolerance and understanding within the wider society.

In a nutshell, Sandell's proposal attempts to alleviate, if not eliminate, exclusion first by "increasing the museum's relevance" to the community and second by properly "representing" the underrepresented in society. He suggested that inclusive museums could become agents of social regeneration by improving individuals' quality of life and by acting as vehicles for broad social change. The former is achieved through the encouragement of personal development while the latter

instigates positive social change by providing opportunities for public debate, education, and persuasion.

To provide a specific case about a museum's capacity to advance social inclusion, I focus on the case of Tam-awan Village. Note that the information I use in this discussion is drawn from an ethnographic work I conducted in 2017 in the said museum. The Tam-awan Village, a brainchild of Filipino artists and philanthropists, most notably, National Artist Benedicto "BenCab" Cabrera, not only exhibits Cordilleran art but also gives a picture of a typical highlander village by letting visitors witness indigenous festivities and rituals and experience sleeping in an "authentic" Cordilleran house.



"Tam-awan Village In-House Performing Group" taken by the author.

Despite the fact that the Philippines is still a laggard in promoting social inclusion, what makes Tam-awan Village worth mentioning is the fact that this museum primarily employs minorities from various indigenous Cordilleran groups. They also give scholarships to the least privileged members of these minority groups and provide part-time employment to Cordilleran students. These scholars are given an option to do some blue-collar jobs in the museum, such as washing the dishes or cleaning the premises, serving food to restaurant-goers, and collecting admission fees at the entrance gate of the museum, among others. Furthermore, one of the museum's main attractions, the live performance of traditional Cordilleran dances and songs, also provides a livelihood to students who can and are willing to perform traditional dances and rituals for museumgoers. These activities of Tam-awan Village's management are indicative of the conscious effort in promoting indigenous culture and empowering the Cordilleran people.

During the fieldwork, I was introduced to some of the student employees of the museum who are members of the indigenous group I described earlier. One of them, Raffy, an 18-year-old student who is originally from Kalinga, works as a cleaner in the museum. Every weekend, he works the whole day in the museum, while on weekdays he puts in a half-day worth of work after his classes. Meanwhile, the performers in the museum are also students who come from different minority groups in the Cordilleras. Their leader, Dominique, a 22-year-old student who came from the Mountain Province, told me that the museum allows them to perform snippets of their rituals so that the museumgoers would at least have an idea of their dances and culture. Though the museum gives them very minimal but regular pay for their weekly performance, its management permits the group to collect donations. Most of their earnings come from the donations of the museumgoers. After a day of hard work, each member of the group receives around 500 to 800 Philippine pesos, or 8 to 14 Euros. However, during peak seasons (summer and Christmas holidays), each member usually receives at least 1,500 Philippine pesos, or 27 Euros, from the donations alone. Note that such an amount in the Philippines is considered generous considering that the minimum daily wage in the country, at the time when I did the fieldwork, ranged from 475 to 512 Philippine pesos, or 8.5 to 9.16 Euros (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018).



“Tourist gaze” taken by the author.

In sum, on top of promoting Cordilleran culture, the museum also empowers members of minority groups in the Philippines. The museum not only serves as an outlet for minority culture and creativity but also provides a livelihood to the least privileged members of these minority groups.

While it appears that Tam-awan Village sets a solid example as to how museums can provide opportunities and “equal” access to all, especially to historically and socially oppressed people, I

maintain that such practices promote exclusion. When the inclusion of minorities and the commercialization of their culture becomes the core of a museum, does it not replicate borders? Can “equality” be positively achieved in a society when minorities are subjected to commodification? Although it is helpful that minorities such as the Cordillerans are given the opportunity to improve their living conditions through performing their rituals and dances, the mere act of making them the spectacle of a museum often leads to their objectification. As I have observed, the gaze of the tourists generates or furthers their “othering.”

Moreover, this objectification of the Cordilleran rituals and dances as enabled by commodification reproduce colonial stereotypes such as the “primitivity” and “backwardness” of the said population. On occasions when museumgoers participated in the performances, some mocked the steps that the performers taught them. There were instances when some members of the audience teased their friends who participated in the performances and laughingly called them “Igorot” (a discriminatory term that has colonial origins which pertain to the mountain people).

Thus, in advancing the integration of marginalized people through the exhibition of their culture (or through increasing the general population’s awareness of the “other”), the museum falls short in its attempt to promote social inclusion. It instead reproduces the subjectivity and marginality of the said population. Hence, the paradox of social inclusion—exclusion happens even when museums intend to foster the integration of the “other” into society. Museums ironically reproduce the subjectivities that they hope to eradicate. The cycle of exclusion continues to be manifested and reinforced despite its inclusionary intentions.

I am ending this essay with such questions and criticisms not to undermine the capacity of museums to take part in the project of social inclusion. While museums can take part in promoting and empowering the marginalized, the goal of achieving social inclusion should be approached on a broader scale—a scale that goes beyond the walls and confines of museums.

Notes

1. Western colonialism in the Philippines, like in other former Western colonies, has created different depictions of indigenous peoples, such as “primitive,” “backward,” “unhygienic,” “barbaric,” and “savage.” Colonial governments juxtaposed the “modernness” of their civilization with the “primitive” and “backward” culture of their subjects to conveniently justify their colonial agendas. For instance, when the Americans showcased their colonization of the Philippines in the 1904 St. Louis World Fair, the Cordillerans, whom they described as “brown-skinned, half-naked, dog-eating Igorots,” were made to perform their activities and rituals for museumgoers.

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