

The postcolonial museum: the arts of memory and the pressures of histories, edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra de Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michela Quadraro, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing, 2014, 274pp., £65.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978 1 4724 1567 7

This edited collection foregrounds the notion of a “postcolonial museum” as a space which dislocates and reinvents practices of memorization and exhibition. Comprising eighteen chapters, *The Postcolonial Museum* vigorously and lucidly exposes eurocentric archival strategies, based on displaying accumulations of the past and rooted within western modernity and its dynamics of power. Questions such as “how do museums ‘de-colonialise’ themselves?” and how do they “get rid of the burden of the past?” (11) inaugurate a long overdue critical discussion about postcolonial aesthetics in our globalized present.

The book offers a new vision of the museum: rather than a place to exhibit the past, the postcolonial museum is conceived as a space in which to generate new narratives and alternative archives, to experiment and re-configure established understandings of spatiality. The “Harraga rap” (5–6), an emblematic example of migrant aesthetics emerging from the experiences of migration in the Mediterranean, proposes alternative narratives – from excluded, subaltern voices – which deconstruct and re-write the totalizing and exclusionary versions of history and overcome established ideas of patrimony and heritage. Migratory phenomena today – reminders that colonialism is not a concluded chapter – interrogate cultural heritage and configure alternative realities; “migrant aesthetics transposes us into an alternative cartography [...] this is a map that stretches the cultural and geographical horizons drawn by both official historiography and museology” (7). In Chapter 1, “A Museum Without Objects”, Françoise Vergès notes that the museum as an accumulation of objects belongs to an economy (and a culture) of predation, looting and consumption; the “Museum Without Objects” becomes a space where other cartographies of the world are evoked and imagined – lost objects, gaps in individual and collective memory, erased histories and archival voids. Such critical interventions into museum collections “help unravel the colonial syntax and logic still deeply engrained in many Western museums” (135); this is the case with Fred Wilson’s 1992 *Mining the Museum* installation aimed at decolonizing and unlocking (lost) histories, described in Chapter 9.

The book opens up vital, new critical terrain: it gestures towards a new critical museum theory which disrupts the linearity of euro-museums, probes museums to reinvent their language and to open up spaces for the peripheries and proposes new modes to decolonize archival and exhibitionary praxis. Tarek Elhaik’s “The Incurable Image: Curation and Reception on a Tri-continental Scene” (Chapter 12) re-evaluates the role of curating as a “dominant” practice. Claiming that “curation is the state of exception that has become the rule” (161), Elhaik proposes “incurable images” as sites which escape “the reach of curatorial

practice and its attendant disciplinary institutions” and point to “troubles and disorders that cannot be treated and cared for” (173). Probing the limits of representation, *The Postcolonial Museum* posits absence and erasure not as a lack, but as an interrogation, and invites us to consider museums as critical spaces in which to question modernity.

This timely publication articulates a productive interdisciplinary debate between postcolonial studies and museum and heritage studies, cultural theory and aesthetics. Here the museum as a display of objects and artefacts – removed from their contexts and exhibited as “European knowledge” – is undone; a postcolonial museum is, instead, a space where erased and obliterated histories are enunciated. In the Afterword, Iain Chambers poignantly announces the *archiving* of the museum as we know it: “When others refuse to be othered, the exhibitionary machinery of knowledge finally begins to stutter in the violent circuits of a moribund narcissism” (244).

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