

Representing migrant narratives: Museum participant generated media programs as sites of testimony and the performance of complex identities

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With the rise of participatory media-making in museums, visitors are increasingly invited to 'have their say' in galleries and touring programs. At the same time, some scholars have been critical of the familiar tropes through which migration heritage has traditionally been represented in museum exhibitions. This includes a critique of exhibitions in which migrant experiences are reduced to narratives of rebirth, enrichment, and 'the journey' at the expense of more challenging themes. With its offer of a potentially more immediate and democratic format, how might participant generated media challenge traditional approaches to the representation of migrant heritage in museums?

This paper focuses on a recent project at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne, Australia called Talking Difference. The project – on which the author was a staff member – offered a Portable Studio, which toured to schools, libraries and community centres. The studio consisted of a camera and touch screen and offered members of the general public the opportunity to create video questions and answers related to cultural diversity and race-based discrimination. In most locations, the museum invited local migrant groups to create source questions for the studio. As a result, participants created a media archive offering an intimate range of perspectives on the experience of migration alongside broader dialogue on notions of identity, belonging, race, and discrimination.

The paper presents an analysis of responses in the Portable Studio showing that in many instances, migrants themselves reproduced the narrative tropes that have become common in museums. At the same time participants articulated complex and multifaceted identities. However, the project rarely engendered engagement with tension and conflict in the migrant experience or robust critique of systemic discrimination against migrants in Australia. Working with analytical techniques inherited from museum studies, the paper outlines alternative means by which museums could create safe spaces for these more complex aspects of migrant experiences.