ARTICLES

Museums and the Citizenship of Hate
The Michael Volkerling Memorial Lecture 2021

Kylie Message

ABSTRACT: This article asks if and how national museums today, which have in recent decades adopted a remit for social rights activism, have an obligation to engage with a broad spectrum of political participation and expression, including contemporary forms of far-right extremism and white grievance politics. How can museums engage with and respond meaningfully to the upsurge in acts of violence perpetrated in the name of structural, collective, and personal ideologies based on hate, xenophobia, and racism? Responding to these questions requires museums to move beyond acts of symbolic national commemoration and grapple with the human expressions and experiences of hate. Drawing on current museum scholarship and practice that is increasingly open to embracing research into studies of emotion and affect, as well as activism and its shifting narratives, the article concludes that the task of curatorial activism should be focused on effecting processes of structural—internal, institutional—change. Furthermore, this process can lead to the understanding that our forms of being human are not just related to our interpersonal interactions in the private sphere but also influence all aspects of civic and institutional life—including the ones that raise difficult questions or unpalatable truths about who we are, individually, and as citizens of the worlds to which we contribute.

KEYWORDS: activism, extremism, hate, human rights, national museums, nationalism, politics

Marks in Time: Preliminary Comments

A named public lecture is a curious beast. It marks a moment in time: the day the lecture is delivered. It commemorates the namesake’s professional legacy, and it often says something of their continuing presence in personal memory. It is an attempt by the lecturer to bring their
own, usually current, work into dialogue with someone no longer with us, in order to imagine a conversation about the world that will never be held. It is, as such, a combination of individual reflection, a public point in time, an intellectual context—and an empirical as well as speculative exercise. The challenge of bringing together depth and breadth and public and private is shared by all commemorative activities, including by the museums, galleries, libraries, archives, and collections that have been analyzed in the pages of Museum Worlds: Advances in Research since 2012. It was a happy coincidence when I was invited to have the Michael Volkerling lecture, which I delivered last year, published in the ten-year anniversary volume of Museum Worlds, a journal for which, with Sandra Dudley, I was founding coeditor.

Museum Worlds was the brainchild of museum anthropologist Howard Morphy and publishing pioneer Vivian Berghahn. Their shared commitment to establishing a journal that was itself intended to provide an annual mark in time reflection on recent advances in the field of museum studies was visionary and necessary. Their commitment to understanding public history as a living actor that plays a significant role in the social and political lives of the worlds that we all inhabit also influenced the development of Routledge’s Museums in Focus book series, which I went on to develop following my editorial association with Museum Worlds. Together, these complementary editorial projects platform debates and support rigorous, in-depth reviews of debates that extend understandings about the acute role museums play as political actors in the contemporary social world.

The urgency of the critical scholarly approach of always investigating laterally (through engaged research, discussion, and ethnographic methods, for example) and temporally (always moving “two steps forward three steps back”) in order to end up at a place of adequate, albeit never complete, knowledge resonates for me today as I revisit the text that I wrote for the Volkerling lecture. In the lecture, I sought to contextualize contemporary hate actions against the post–World War II genesis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, and the establishment of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 1946. I aimed to show the genealogy between fascist nationalism and acts of hate perpetrated by individuals or fringe groups in the twenty-first century. Engaging with the topic through the lens of their own most proximate experience, the audience’s primary focus of discussion was the implications of what I was suggesting in the context of the Christchurch massacre in 2019, and how—indeed, if—museums should collect from and narrate unthinkable expressions of hate crime. Today, as I revisit this lecture, our lives have been shaken again, this time as a new war in Europe marks yet another moment in time. Although it is late summer in the city where I live, far away from Ukraine, the links between the specific actions of hate crime and the broader historical context of war are chilling.

The lecture text is included here as it was delivered, as a both a mark in time and in honor of Michael Volkerling (1948–2014).

**Introduction**

No good title in 2021 doesn’t include some form of clickbait, so please excuse mine. What I essentially want to ask today is if and how national museums, which have in recent decades adopted a remit for social rights activism, have an obligation to engage with a broad spectrum of political participation and expression, including contemporary forms of far-right extremism and white grievance politics. Ultimately, the goal for museums may be to represent hate without providing legitimacy or a platform for its ideas or actors, to offer information and analysis to equip institutions and individuals to better understand the impact of hate crime and its contin-
ued presence, and the necessity of standing up against the culture of fear that it generates. But
the question of how to do this—or if even if it is the right thing to do—is not straightforward.

I am afraid I won't have many answers for you in my talk today. Just questions. Lots of ques-
tions. In fact, this talk is more like a work-in-progress presentation or a thought exercise—for
me as much as it is for you—than it is a series of case studies or a report on research findings.
Partly this is because the research that I am doing is based primarily in the United States, and
I haven't been able to travel there for two years because of COVID-19. But it is also because it
is a really difficult topic that we have yet to work out exactly how to approach. As such, I'm not
going to elaborate on specific cases. Instead, I will suggest some possible ways forward, offer
some tools for our thinking, and consider the language that might work for problematic cases.
This topic is difficult—and perhaps better left alone. And even if I get it wrong—as I am sure to
do—I still feel like there is worth associated with trying to engage with some of the issues and
the dialog the topic generates.

As I grappled with writing this lecture earlier this week, I read a profile piece in The
Guardian about famous “starchitects,” Herzog and de Meuron, who have designed large-scale public
buildings across the world since the 1970s. The title of the piece was a quote from the firm:
“Architecture is the art of facts. We shouldn’t have a moralistic standpoint.” It struck me as
perhaps offering a useful segue into the topic for today. “What, if anything, can architecture
contribute to freedom and justice and the struggles of human existence?” asked the journalist,
Rowan Moore (2021), “or, is its job just to stand back and look ornamental while the dramas and
traumas of the planet go on around it?”

Moore’s musing evokes similar discourse and questions to what have been applied to mu-
seums in the last two or three decades, so brings us neatly to the topic for today. The idea that
museums are political as well as cultural sites, organizations, and communities is a simple but
important one. This understanding was deeply held by Dr. Michael Volkerling, after whom this
lecture is named. Dr. Volkerling was widely recognized as a “cultural visionary.” He was, among
other things, one of the principal architects of New Zealand’s cultural and creative sectors. He
led the Arts Council (Creative New Zealand) for 11 years and was involved in the amalgamation
of the National Museum and National Art Gallery and the development of the Museum of New
Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. According to an obituary in NZEDGE:

This was at a tumultuous time in New Zealand politics and society—the Muldoon years with
the Springbok tour, protests against French nuclear testing in the South Pacific, Maori land
rights, women's rights, gay rights, and then the election of the fourth Labour government
with its attendant free market policies and share market boom and bust . . . A key moment in
Michael's directorship was the Te Maori exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of
Art in 1984, a milestone in the Maori cultural renaissance. (Sweeney 2022)

Dr. Volkerling knew that culture was not just political but that it could make significant contri-
butions to political practices and institutions as well as national understandings of selfhood. He
understood the role of education in this endeavor, and his ability to span the gap between theory
and practice and between the university and the sector established the model for the Museum
and Heritage Studies program at Victoria University of Wellington, one of the first partner-
ship-rich programs of its kind in our part of the world. My own path crossed Dr. Volkerling's in
2002, at a cultural policy conference held at Te Papa that he invited me to contribute to. He was
kind to me, and engaged intellectually and seriously with my work, even though I was a very
junior lecturer working at another department at the university. I was particularly drawn to
Michael's ability to speak across and through the often-polarized spheres of politics and culture.
I'm honored and moved to be speaking in his honor tonight, and I hope I do justice to his legacy.
Museums and Human Rights

So, where to start? Maybe with a reminder that museums always reflect and embody the zeitgeist of the period in which they are produced. They are also always tied to the broader category or genre of “history,” as well as to both the everyday ordinary and spectacular ways in which histories are understood, represented, commemorated—and contested. People here today will be familiar with the ways in which public museums have traditionally protected and prosecuted the interests of nationalism, extending to projects of colonialism, nation-building, and civic engagement (Bennett 2015). Many of you will also know that the shifts to professionalization of museum practice that emerged through the development of UNESCO (in 1945) and the International Council of Museums (in 1946) were aligned with the impetus to protect the human rights and freedoms inscribed into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. Developed in the aftermath of World War II, and specifically the atrocities of the Holocaust (Morsink 2019), the Declaration was a response to the “barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind” (Preamble, section 2). It promised to usher in a new era founded on the “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.”

However, as the global events of recent years and intervening decades have demonstrated, “human rights,” like museums, have relational meanings and reflect historical legacies, social norms, and the expectations, as well as the challenges, of any given “contemporary” time. Issa Shivji (1999) counsels us that human rights should not be understood as having a static definition removed from human experience or the governance of individuals and populations. It is, he says, a term susceptible to political utility and manipulation as well as resistance. Human rights, he says:

mirror the struggles and concerns of the dominant social groups in society at a particular time as these groups organise and reorganise to maintain their position. At the same time, rights formulation and articulation reflect, albeit in a subordinate position, the resistance of the dominated as they strive to change the status quo. Human rights, therefore, like any other systemised regimes of articulated ideas, is a contested terrain. (1999: 253–254)

I’m not going to address all the images included in the presentation slides as I move through my talk (which can be viewed at the online recording of the lecture; see Message 2021), but I do want to briefly discuss two historical images. The first image (on the left of the screen) shows the entrance to a 1968 temporary exhibit at the National Museum of American History that had been curated to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Hanging underneath the “Human Rights Credo” was the exhibition’s signature item, a memorial banner to Martin Luther King Jr., which had been handmade by residents of Resurrection City, on the Smithsonian Mall during the Poor Peoples’ campaign earlier that same year. The banner was especially symbolic given the assassination of Dr. King, which occurred only a few months before the exhibition opened. The image on the right shows what was left of the banner after it was attacked and destroyed by an arsonist in the museum gallery. This black-and-white photograph is part of the police records of the attack, but it was included in museum records. The person responsible for the attack was never apprehended.

Certainly, and as this image signals, the decades following World War II have not been free of further persecution of individuals and groups. People here today may know of or have associations with the Federation of International Human Rights Museums or with particular museums, networks, and organizations that seek to progress human rights principles that include but are not limited to agenda-, identity-, and cause-based museums dedicated to genocide and the Holo-
caus, human rights, migration, slavery, torture, and political or social oppression (Message 2014, 2018b). It’s appropriate to insert a diversion here—a reminder that the first Michael Volkering Memorial Lecture, which was presented by the wonderful Professor Richard Sandell, was held at Te Papa in 2015 as part of the International Federation of Human Rights Museums conference that year.

Even more of you will recognize that in recent decades there has been a growing chasm between the aspirations of nationalism where it is narrowly defined—by “alt-right extremists” self-identified with militant nationalism and white supremacy in the United States and Europe, for example, and the mandates of the Declaration of Human Rights. As sites of public culture that increasingly adopt the idea that they should progress social justice agendas, national museums (which remain, for the most, state-funded) are particularly prone to becoming caught up in and by this space of contestation.

**Museums and Contested Histories**

Heated debate over the relationship between nationalism, political interference in public memory, and historical representation on the one hand, and human rights edicts on the other, are of course nothing new. In recent decades, the history and culture wars in Australia, the US, and elsewhere affected and perhaps directed public discourse about the role of commemorative memorials and the history curriculum taught at schools, as well as the kind of history represented in museums. Museums have been attacked for being unpatriotic or subject to “political correctness” (Luke 2002). In Canberra, the opening of the National Museum of Australia, which then Prime Minister John Howard referred to as “very un-museum-like” at its launch in 2001 is a textbook example (Message 2018b). Howard’s view was that the museum represented a left-wing “black armband” view of history that downplayed colonial white achievements (McIntyre 2006: 13). However, museums have also been criticized by members of community groups and other interest groups for not being politically inclusive or activist enough, or for sticking too closely to the government of the day’s “party line” The opening of the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall in Washington, DC, in 2004, for example, generated debate on this issue (Message 2014; see also Cobb 2015). The 1984 Tē Maori exhibition and the 1992 establishment and 1998 opening of Te Papa—both of which were globally significant undertakings that Michael Volkering was involved with—also occurred during the very early phases of this key period (Message 2006).

Without wanting to further revisit this extended and contested past or the rich literature that has been developed about it, it is relevant to note the ways in which diverse viewpoints often coalesce into ideological positions that led to or exacerbated tensions. At the heart of this conflict, in the case of the history and culture wars in the United States and Australia, for instance, were disputes about museums in the late 1980s and 1990s that were starting to reflect the view that museums should be agents of social justice. This belief emerged as a result of changes in the museum sector that advocated for the increasing empowerment of minority groups through access, control, and authority over self-representation. In addition to reflecting the post–World War II expansion of the human rights agenda, this process arose from demands by Indigenous and other groups for the return of cultural patrimony, and for greater agency over collections. A surge in community identified, located, and governed museums, and networks accompanied an expansion of knowledge about museum practice facilitated as a result of the increasing professionalization and recognition of volunteer expertise implicit within the postwar establishment of ICOM and other organizations (Message 2014).
The Activist Turn

Following this pattern of development, museums have increasingly sought to adopt the identity of “activist” institutions (Janes and Sandell 2019; Message 2018a, 2019). This usually means that they embrace and act from a place of social justice, and aspire to be inclusive, to collaborate with minority or marginalized groups, and enable agency and self-representation for these groups, while starting a process of self-reflection and critique of their own complicity with structural racism and the colonial endeavor. They have given voice to social justice movements through various actions, including collecting signs, banners, buttons, and ephemera from current-day protests. In taking on this remit, they very fundamentally contrast with—and seek to actively counteract—the primary goal of racist hate speech, which is to inhibit the ability of the targets of hate speech to talk back. Hate speech aims at a basic level to “exclude its targets from participating in broader deliberative processes” (Gelber 2011: 84).

And yet, despite its well-meaning association with social justice causes, the activist turn has generated some complex challenges for museums. This is particularly the case for museums that seek to problematize homogenous images of national identity, engage in self-reflective practice, or which represent national histories inclusive of human rights abuses. The situation has become acute in recent years, with scholars noting that a mainstreaming of racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and misogynist hate speech in the American public sphere accompanied the rise of Donald Trump, even before his election as president. The spate of nooses found in museum grounds on the US national mall throughout 2019 and 2020 suggests that even where a space for potential dialogue and education exists, it has been appropriated as a symbolic opportunity to promote fear. Furthermore, some commentators argue that the language of white supremacy is trending back in to mainstream society with more common references to nooses, which are, alongside the Confederate flag, an increasingly ubiquitous expression of hate. Others in the US observe that the nooses have always been there and will be for years to come (Milloy 2017). Either way, as Holland Cotter (2017) observed:

The culture wars are back. So is the civil rights movement. So is the Civil War. They were all in evidence in Charlottesville, Va., on Aug. 12, when a protest over the planned removal from a city park of a statue of the Southern Civil War general Robert E. Lee exploded in violence. Two sets of protesters met and clashed: a battalion of white nationalists, neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klanners and a crowd of counter-protesters, some with Black Lives Matter placards. Then there was a second explosion, this one on the internet, when President Donald J. Trump responded, after a significant pause, with an equivocating message. He blamed both sides for the violence (“What about the alt-left that came charging?”). He pronounced Robert E. Lee the equal of George Washington. He praised the “beauty” of the Lee statue and lamented the loss of other Confederate monuments.

One of the things I take from these statements is that it is one thing for museums to represent historical injustice or human rights abuses alongside a high-profile push for contemporary collecting from left-wing protest and reform movements—like climate change activism, Black Lives Matter, refugee justice, or the #MeToo movement—but it is another thing altogether to be faced with escalating expressions of right-wing extremism or ethno-nationalism that seek explicitly and directly to restrict or annul the freedoms and protections afforded by the law rather than expanding and protecting the full spectrum of practices associated with belonging to a contemporary multicultural nation. This category might also include proponents of “fake news,” and anti-vaccination anti-lockdown movements claiming that public health measures infringe on the rights of individuals within society. How, then, can we start to think across—to
bridge—the gulf between hate speech advocates and the museums and other institutions (like schools, universities, some media) that seek to provide education and other programs to counteract the effects of their words?

This is important because hate speech functions through antagonism. It is confrontational and often terrifying, designed to create a sense of possibility for an alternative structure of perceived normality/normalization. However, acts of fearmongering are not just forms of distraction. They are exercises in testing or challenging the legitimacy of legislation and community standards around freedom of expression. In so doing, they reveal the tensions between maintaining freedom of expression and curbing racism in all parts of the world. Political scientist Erik Bleich refers to this tension as “a fundamental dilemma for liberal democracies” (quoted in Bangstad 2017; see also Gelber and McNamara 2016). The conundrum that is caused by the “inevitable” dilemma means there is little space for dialog between museums, governmental organizations, and proponents of the extreme right.3

Nationalism and Hate

This brings us, of course, to our key problem: How might national museums—as sites of cultural safety and civic leadership—respond to articulations of citizenship that go against the majority view of acceptable ideology and behavior? Expressions of hate may include hate mail or statements in visitor books or web comments, events such as physical protests and attacks, and the symbolism associated with certain items being left on museum grounds or in exhibitions. National museums face a conundrum when it comes to these expressions, which are part of their own institutional experience and legacy, part of a broader culture of racism, as well as being a form of citizen activism, albeit a minority one. Expressions of hate—such as historical Ku Klux Klan materials at the National Museum of American History—have in the past been deemed “not in the public interest” and thereby removed from sight (Message 2014; for other reasons, see also Message, in press).

National museums need to grapple with this problem though, because of their own role as regulatory government institutions that speak to and guide citizenship understandings and practices, and because of their recent interest in representing political reform and protest movements and actions. But how can they do it without providing legitimacy or a platform for the ideas being expressed? The fact that museums have themselves increasingly become the target of hate crimes suggests that their cultural capital and influence is recognized among people targeting them as sites for hate crimes. It means there is more than just academic value to demonstrating what happens when different understandings of citizenship come into conflict.

Might there even be an ethical imperative for museums to engage with extraordinary hate acts, such as nooses left on museum grounds, as well as the sociopolitical context in which the normalization of extreme, antidemocratic thought occurs? To be honest, I just don’t know. What I do know though is that collection materials and evidence of historical instances of hate do exist at many museums; I first came about this when I was researching activism at the National Museum of American History and found records of Ku Klux Klan materials. This same research trip occurred in 2010, at the height of the conservative Tea Party movement in the US, and I recorded a contemporary protest on the National Mall for the museum’s Division of Political History—this is where the images on the right of this slide come from (Message 2014, 2018a). The National Museum of African American History and Culture has dealt with histories of hate more directly in recent years, and the Immigration Museum in Melbourne opened an exhibition in 2011 called Yours, Mine, Ours, which explores who we are, who others
think we are, what it means to belong and not belong in Australia, and experiences of racism (Message 2018b).

Why Talk about Hate

If there is an imperative for museums to represent forms of expression considered by the most to be antisocial, how might they do it? How do museums represent key national events, such as the anti-government attack on the US Capitol on 6 January this year? This is a really interesting event that was widely viewed as an attack on political culture, where pro-gun expressions functioned as a proxy for racist beliefs, and where national meaning was forced into becoming a transactional item volleyed between protesters and the symbolic site of the Capitol. My sense is that this example may provide a key one to unpack the idea of accountability in relation to what hate studies scholar John Berger (2018) calls the “gray areas” between free speech and violence-inspiring hatred. These gray areas are, he says, where extremism can flourish—and where hate-watch groups—and museum activists and investigative journalists and anyone seeking to do this work—can find themselves in challenging territory.

Despite his warnings, it strikes me that Berger’s “gray areas” are also sites of potential exchange. Even though contemporary culture is characterized by a growing tendency to dismiss and exile opponents, the capacity to disagree is vital for a healthy democracy. Corrosive partisanship flourishes in these gray areas and justifies attempts by governments globally to simultaneously "manage" and weaponize cultural difference—as we saw through the history and culture wars of the 1990s and 2000s (Message 2006), and as we are witnessing today in regard to “cancel culture,” where “the disagreements we need to have—and to have vigorously—are banished from the public square before they’re settled” (Stephens 2017). Museums need to be cautious that their amplification of social justice causes does not escalate the trend toward diminishing spaces for public debate and the educational opportunities these carry. In an essay called “The Dying Art of Disagreement,” Bret Stephens (2017) argues:

To disagree well you must first understand well. You have to read deeply, listen carefully, watch closely. You need to grant your adversary moral respect; give him the intellectual benefit of doubt; have sympathy for his motives and participate empathically with his line of reasoning. And you need to allow for the possibility that you might yet be persuaded of what he has to say.

My specific question regarding the 6 January attack on the US Capitol is how this event will be documented by the Capitol's own historical society, its records, and how will it be represented by the other national museums, particularly the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of American History, which also have clear stakes in the narrative produced (Judkis and McCarthy 2021; Shabad 2021). The model for commemorating the victims of terrorism attacks—such as at the 9/11 Memorial—does not seem applicable in this case (for a discussion, see Message, in press). Perhaps the answer might be in engaging with the academic materials that grapple with free speech legislation or attempt to navigate the dilemma between how to maintain freedom of expression but condone hate speech, keeping in mind that this work tends to emphasize the legal and governmental apparatus of regulation at the expense of the implications and impact and effects of hate speech on human subjects and communities.
How to Talk about Hate

In preparing for this lecture last week, I read an article by New Zealand Race Relations Commissioner Meng Foon (2021) that has stayed with me for its eloquence and relevance. He explained:

The easier it is for us to dehumanise others and see them as anonymous or two-dimensional caricatures, the easier it is for us to turn them into targets of our own unexamined frustrations . . . If we want to understand what makes someone lose their awareness, their respect for basic human rights, their compassion, and then unload on some unsuspecting stranger, perhaps we need first to look in the mirror. Collectively, yes, but individually too.

When I read this, I thought, “Aha! This is what museums can do.”

The need for the research I am suggesting here has crystallized and become more urgent over recent years. Although it is currently nonexistent in museum studies or in studies examining museums, there has been a proliferation of media and academic publications on the far right in other fields in recent years (Ashe et al. 2020; Mondon and Winter 2020). As such, the more I investigate progressive—“left-wing”—forms of museum activism and read about methods for understanding right-wing activism (none of which discuss museums), the more questions I have about hate speech and the also escalating actions associated with right-wing extremism (Miller 2019). Even though the field of museum activism is rapidly growing and is deeply important and impactful, it typically focuses on left-wing and social justice forms of activism. As a consequence, there is no substantive work that directly considers the experience, representation, and impact of hate on museums. This absence (or omittance; see Message, in press) means there is a disconnection between museums’ increased commitment to and engagement with social justice activism and the escalating attention attracted by far-right political parties, social movements, and groups. The disconnection also means there is no comprehensive conceptual and methodological toolkit to investigate the diverse expressions of hate in the multiorganizational fields it occupies and seeks to disrupt.

Some reporting and analysis of hate at museums exists. This occurs mostly in the form of news articles, reports by hate-watch groups, and some academic articles. Topics include short reports of hate acts occurring at museums (Rauen and Hall 2017), projections that museums will increasingly become identified as targets by domestic terrorists (Atkinson et al. 2020), and methodologies for studying hate, often intended for journalists (e.g., Temkin and Yanay 1988, which presents an approach to analyzing political hate letters). There is precedent for writing about hate in the context of Holocaust and human rights-focused museums, and recent years have seen the development of a new field of “hate studies,” which is increasingly associated with university-based institutes or centers that seek to promote scholarly and public outcomes (Toscano 2019). One such example is the Herbert and Valmae Freilich Project for the Study of Bigotry at my own institution (Australian National University), which aims to support research into the causes, histories and the effects of ethnic, cultural, religious, and sexual bigotry and animosity, to promote public discussion of how such intolerance can be combated by educational and social programs.

Interestingly, the slow establishment of hate studies as a field in countries like Canada, the US, and the UK, which at least tout themselves as strongly committed to eliminating prejudices and racism, have been explained by scholar Barbara Perry as being “a failure, or a denial even, to acknowledge that hate and the violence associated with it remain a part of our culture” (quoted in Ma 2011; see also Perry 2001; Stern 2004). The absence, until now, of studies of hate in and at museums may be the result of a similar failure or denial about how to engage with that culture. However, as key instruments of civic culture, museums are, I think, significant places to host and extend the discussions that will arise as a result of acknowledging hate.
But how can museums critically address hate speech without extending or consolidating the structural sociopolitical conditions under which singular concepts of white nationalism, racism, hate, and fear thrive and become normalized? I’m really interested in the work of Sindre Bangstad (2017), who advocates for a different tactic, suggesting that an anthropological lens can bridge rather than exacerbate the distinctions existing between disciplines primarily affiliated with political and legal studies and other more “grounded forms of analysis” concerned with victim impact and the effect of certain events or conditions (Message 2018b: 7). Although he does not write about museums, his approach requires the construction of a conversation between a site and its context—that is, the environment within which the museum, for example, operates. The context includes other instruments of governance such as the media and policy initiatives, both of which act upon and help shape the public sphere.

The appeal of this approach is that it refuses to accept hate speech’s project of excluding its targets from participating in broader deliberative processes. It also avoids the trap of closing down the discussion about hate speech that can be an outcome of debates about racism (which can risk leaning in the favor of speech restriction and thereby further silencing everyone involved). Bangstad’s (2017) approach identifies the need to acknowledge spaces of communication with individuals targeted by hate speech. It resonates with the approaches that are increasingly being preferred by museums and museum studies in that it:

- starts with the real-life experiences of victims of hate speech in order to tell us “exactly what hate speech sounds and feels like and what it does”;
- focuses on hate speech’s relation to power, social status, race, and gender to “elicit the often ignored or glossed over linkages between more mainstream discourses that feed on and onto hate speech”;
- and maps the intersections and shared strategies that exist between forms of hate speech that target specific “causes” (e.g., immigration, Islam, Black Lives Matter, or feminism) and contribute to a broader culture of fear and the normalization of hate speech.

This project is a fundamentally simple—and political—one that works on the proposition that rehumanizing the victims of hate speech will be a powerful tool in the larger project of challenging the normalization of structural racism. Many of the anthropological tactics he advises have an established precedent of being widely employed in museums globally, including those with a thematic focus on issues including migration, human rights, genocide, and extending also to many of the institutions and places associated with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience as well as a very large number of identity-based and national museums globally, including the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which includes significant commentary about race hate. It also reiterates the approach by Tad Stahnke (2008) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, who says that countering the rise of hate crime to foster changes in attitudes and behaviors requires museums to identify and respond to specific incidents.

Adding to the body of politically driven academic scholarship represented by Bangstad (2017) is a rapidly growing genre of museums and exhibitions that have taken on the task of directly exploring the application and experience of migration policy, multicultural initiatives, and public discourse and debate from a range of perspectives. The expansion of museums working with these subjects globally suggests that although it can sometimes seem as though there is little room for interaction between social justice activism (seen as rational/neutral) and hate speech (seen as irrational/abject), an increasing—perhaps ambivalent—opportunity has actually opened up, perhaps as a consequence of the increasing ubiquity and “mainstreaming” of hate speech in
contemporary life. In other words, the fact that nooses have been left on the grounds of museums reiterates the political function of culture and the significance of museums as sites of identity that can be used by museums as material evidence for public discussion.

**Conclusion**

I’ve covered a wide terrain in this presentation, but I want to conclude by circling back to the question of how museums today can engage with and respond meaningfully to the upsurge in acts of violence perpetrated in the name of structural, collective, and personal ideologies based on hate, xenophobia, and racism. Responding to this question requires museums to move beyond acts of symbolic national commemoration and grapple with the human expressions and experiences of hate—in ways suggested, for example, by Bangstad (2017).

A contested present will obviously become a contested history in museological and other representations, so understanding how museums respond to contemporary conflict is relevant, and requires a consideration of the conundrum about how personal narratives and experiences of what it means to be human fall within or intersect with representations of contested histories on a national scale (as in the case of national museums, for example) or global platforms (such as UNESCO and related organizations). This is even more important where the small-scale personal stories disappear from the narrative frame, as they so often do in contexts where the politics of the nation are deeply polarized and the stakes for formal political players are high—as in the case of political landscapes in which diversity is positioned as threatening homogenous symbols of national unity.

Luckily, current museum scholarship and practice is increasingly open to embracing research into studies of emotion and affect, as well as activism and its shifting narratives. But more work could be done in drawing firmer links between what it means to be an empathetic human subject today and the challenge for museums in representing a humanity that is defined according to supra-state conventions that were written in the late 1940s to reflect the challenges and contestations of a previous era marked by international conflict. This requires recognition of structural factors that impact not just governmental decision-making or the creation of nongovernment organizational instruments (including ICOM), but the creation of personal and collective belief systems and the ways in which these are replicated internally within the structures and operational modes employed by our diverse institutions, as well as the outward facing activities and representations they present publicly.

My own view is that the task of curatorial activism is a self-reflexive one that should be focused first and foremost on effecting processes of structural—internal, institutional—change (Message 2019). I suggest that this process can lead to improved understanding that our forms of being human are not just related to our interpersonal interactions in the private sphere but also influence (and are impacted by) all aspects of civic and institutional life—including the ones that raise difficult questions or unpalatable truths about who we are, individually, and as citizens of the worlds to which we contribute.
KYLIE MESSAGE is Professor of Public Humanities and the Head of the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University. Her work interrogates the relationships between cultural organizations, citizenship, government, and political reform movements. Her books include Collecting Activism, Archiving Occupy Wall Street (2019), The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge (2018), Museums and Racism (2018), Museums and Social Activism: Engaged Protest (2014), New Museums and the Making of Culture (2006), and Museum Theory: An Expanded Field (edited with Andrea Witcomb, 2015, reprinted 2020).

NOTES

1. I’ve always been interested by moments in time and the contingencies that created across case studies and context. Sections of the Volkerling lecture drew on an article I had previously published in Museum International, which was itself an exercise in mapping global history that focused on 21 November 2018 as the centennial commemoration of the armistice that ended World War I (see Message 2018c).
2. I thank Conal McCarthy, Ruth Harley, National Services Te Paerangi, and Victoria University of Wellington for inviting me to deliver the Michael Volkerling Memorial Lecture by Zoom at Te Papa in Wellington in November 2021.
3. For discussion of the “far-right” or “alt-right extremists” self-identified with white nationalism and white superiority who mobilized in support of Trump’s presidential campaign, see Posner and Neiwert (2016).

REFERENCES


