

Margaret Anderson

## Museums, Conflicted Memory and Remembrance in Contemporary Multicultural Societies

In recent decades many museums of history have sought to broaden both the perspectives of the past they present and the voices reflected in their galleries. The public memory constructed as a result has been more complex and more qualified, but also more 'difficult' and sometimes, more controversial. Museum historians, more accustomed to quiet reflection and scholarly discussion, have found themselves on occasion at the centre of impassioned public debates, in which belief and political expediency predominate, at the expense of historical evidence.

Contemporary multicultural societies present particular challenges to museums seeking to expand the public memory, since immigrant community memories may be at odds not only with those of the 'dominant' culture, but with each other. When the creation of memory becomes the more emotive activity of remembrance, such tensions are especially acute.

This paper examines the experience of South Australia's Migration Museum in negotiating public memory and public remembrance with local refugee communities over the past 25 years. It argues that a willingness to engage with conflicted histories has significantly enriched the museum's presentations. But it also suggests that the same inclusive practices that enable active community engagement with the museum, and empower curators to partner with communities to present some 'difficult' histories, may actually constrain them in presenting others. Scholarly discourse surrounding museums and their presentation of 'difficult heritage' does not always acknowledge this inherent contradiction.

## CV

Margaret Anderson is the Director of History South Australia, a state government agency that manages three history museums and a community history program. In a career spanning 30 years she has worked as a public historian in various museums and taught history and Australian Studies at Monash University. Her research interests include the history of women and the family, women's work, national allegory and the feminine, and the practice of public history. She has published in all of the above. A particular interest at present is the practice of digital history – both the potential of e-research in history and the opportunities for history museums in the on-line environment. Margaret is the current Chair of the Council of Australasian Museum Directors.

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