THE DISOBEDIENT MUSEUM

Writing at the Edge

Kylie Message

The Disobedient Museum

The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge aims to motivate disciplinary thinking to reimagine writing about museums as an activity where resistant forms of thinking, seeing, feeling, and acting can be produced and theorized as a form of protest against disciplinary stagnation.

Drawing on a range of cultural, theoretical, and political approaches, Kylie Message examines links between methods of critique today and moments of historical and disciplinary crisis, and asks what contribution museums might make to these, either as direct actors or through activities that sit more comfortably within their institutional remit. Identifying the process of writing about museums as a form of activism that brings together and elaborates on cultural and political agendas for change, the book explores how a process of engaged critique might benefit museum studies, what this critique might look like, and how museum studies might make a contribution to discourses of social and political change.

The Disobedient Museum is the first volume in Routledge's innovative Museums in Focus series and will be of great interest to scholars and students in the fields of museum studies, heritage studies, public history, and cultural studies. It should also be essential reading for museum practitioners, particularly those engaged with questions about the role of museums in regard to social activism and contentious contemporary challenges.

Kylie Message is Associate Professor and Senior Fellow in the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University. She is the Series Editor of 'Museums in Focus'.

Routledge Museums in Focus

Series Editor: Kylie Message

Committed to the articulation of big, even risky, ideas in small format publications, Museums in Focus challenges authors and readers to experiment with, innovate, and press museums and the intellectual frameworks through which we view these. It encourages debate about the cultural value and political nature of museums and heritage in contemporary society, and welcomes attempts to radically rethink the way we engage with museums in intellectual life to better articulate the relationship between culture, politics, and academic scholarship about museums and related cultural products and phenomena. The series offers a platform for approaches that radically rethink the relationships between cultural and intellectual dissent and crisis and debates about museums, politics and the broader public sphere.

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The Disobedient Museum
Writing at the Edge

Kylie Message

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For Oscar and Ezra

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Series preface

Museums in Focus is a series of short format books published by Routledge that aims to foster debate about the cultural value and political nature of museums and heritage in contemporary society. It encourages attempts to radically rethink the way we engage with museums in intellectual life to better articulate the relationship of culture, politics, and academic scholarship about museums to related cultural products and phenomena.

Committed to the articulation of big, even risky ideas in small format publications, the series challenges authors and readers to experiment with, innovate, and press museums and the intellectual frameworks through which we view these in order to keep exploring, questioning, and extending knowledge in the fields of museum studies, heritage and cultural studies, and cognate fields such as history, art history, anthropology, and archaeology to find new ways of transferring knowledge with others in, beyond, and outside related fields.

The intellectual hypothesis motivating the series is that museums are not innately 'useful', 'safe', or even 'public' places, and that recalibrating our thinking about them might benefit from adopting a more radical and transgressive form of logic and approach. Examining this problem requires a level of comfort with (or at least tolerance of) ideas of crisis, dissent, protest, and radical thinking, and authors might benefit from considering how cultural and intellectual crisis, regeneration, and anxiety have been approached in other disciplines and contexts. The challenge requires brave and committed scholarship, as well as debate between and across diverse disciplinary and theoretical/practical contexts in order to force a constant process of intellectual reflection and questioning of the museological canon as it currently stands.

Acknowledgments

work by scholars, including Greg Dening, whom I had the pleasure of meeting as a PhD student and whose ideas are explored in Chapter 3. Ewan Johnston and Bob and Jill Message have each played important parts in that journey, and I continue to be indebted to them for their ongoing support. Finally, I am particularly grateful to Guy Jones. For him, only all the words and yet none of the words will do. And my children, who have, at times, excelled as role models in the arts of disobedience but who have, in so doing, offered a constant reminder to me of Greg Dening's advice in his 2004 book *Beach Crossings* about the importance to '[d]are to voyage across times, cultures, and self. Especially self'. Thanks, O and E; keep daring to cross boundaries. This book is for you.

This is not a protest. This is a process[1]

Figure 0.1 Preparations and staging tests the day before the Restoring Honor rally on the National Mall, Washington, D.C., August 27, 2010

Photograph by Kylie Message.

This is a book about writing about museums. My primary case study is the process of writing, and my subject matter consists of forms of critique. My frameworks for critical engagement are drawn from the interdisciplinary fields of museum studies, cultural studies, contemporary art theory, and cognate disciplines including sociology, anthropology, and history. My intention is to explore and make a case for the potential that disciplinary- and interdisciplinary-based modes of critique (and engagements with perceptions of crisis) have in making a political impact, recognizing that such an outcome takes a variety of formal/public, as well as

informal/'behind-the-scenes' approaches. So to be precise, this book is both a political statement (protest) and a process, and it takes as its starting point the premise that these terms are deeply interconnected.

The book has two main aims. The first is to argue that studies of culture generally and studies of museums specifically can make a significant contribution to understandings about social protest and reform movements.[2] The second is to argue that writing about museums can itself be a form of intellectual activism that has the potential to impact on museums and the sociopolitical context in which museums operate. Based on research into museums, political activism, and discourses of critical engagement, this book starts from the understanding that museums are not innately 'useful', 'safe', or even 'public' places, and contends that recalibrating our thinking about them requires a level of comfort (if not direct engagement) with ideas of crisis, dissent, protest, and radical thinking. It offers a preliminary overview of the relationship between academic theory and activist culture in museum and sociopolitical contexts to establish pathways for investigating connections between crisis and regeneration in disciplinary contexts in order to ask whether (and how) museums have contributed to the activity of agenda setting for debates over cultural crisis, as well as what role writing about museums might have for progressing social justice aims.

The intellectual premise of the book is that the interdisciplinary field of museum studies functions as a kind of boundary discipline, meaning that it occupies the conceptual spaces that are typically assumed to exist 'in-between' traditional disciplinary canons (such as history and anthropology), dichtomized terms (such as theory and practice), and the spaces of conflict between territories or positions defined in opposition to each other (such as the political 'left' versus the political 'right'). Rather than being narrowly contained within these border zones, the interdisciplinary work that is done in these spaces is expansive and transgresses the edges of the disciplines, terms and territories that it rubs against. It is both influenced by and infiltrates its neighboring fields to show the relationships that exist across normative disciplinary distinctions. The book models a 'disobedient' framework for challenging the normativity of traditional disciplinary approaches to knowledge formation. It advocates a form of engaged research that draws on a foundation of historical practices, as well as disciplinary forms of critique to investigate the politics of museums and ultimately challenge museum studies about the ways it has typically addressed the connections between culture and politics.

While this book draws on interdisciplinary approaches to map the conceptual terrain of the disobedient museum, it is not a book about disciplinarity per se.[3] Yet as I have already indicated and as will become a core theme throughout the book, interdisciplinarity relies on a complex network of relationships – oftentimes awkward – with practices and traditions of

disciplinary thinking. Despite the prima facie connotations with modern forms of rationality and instrumentalized forms of knowledge production and legitimation associated with institutions such as museums and universities (Best and Kellner 1991),[4] I have elected to retain use of the term 'disciplinarity' as a way to keep these networks apparent, to keep calling the field's constituent terms and relations into question, as a way of encouraging the terms to 'interrogate each other, to negotiate the boundaries between them' (Mitchell 1995: 543). Instead of looking for a 'post-disciplinary' or 'post-critical' framework that might be associated with post- or hypermodernity (see Prior 2003: 52, 69 fn 2), I have kept the term in play as a tactic to keep the limitations of the concept of disciplinarity in our line of vision. It is one way of signaling how the limits of discursive legibility can provide a space of risk in which new or reconstituted assemblages of meaning are generated.[5]

I have identified spaces of disciplinary risk (where recuperation into mainstream narratives or modernist paradigms are as much a possible outcome as the collapse of meaning) as the worksite of the disobedient museum in order to illuminate how disciplines interact comfortably as well as with dissonance to produce what visual culture theorist W.J.T. Mitchell calls spaces of 'indiscipline' (Mitchell 1995: 541).[6] My tactical use of disciplinarity has developed partly in response to the politically engaged (if not active) work of, at, and by many contemporary museums. This engagement aims to provide a pathway for greater interaction between constituent terms than that allowed by what Nick Prior (2003: 51) disparagingly calls the 'orthodoxy in academic writings on postmodern culture' that appear determined to 'record the death rattle of the project of the museum as it was forged in the crucible of European Enlightenment'. What is needed, according to Prior, espousing a view I share, is 'an approach that treats "strong" forms of postmodern theorizing with caution, but remains equally skeptical of static conceptions of the museum as unchanged since the nineteenth century' (Prior 2006: 520; also Message 2006).[7]

My 'disobedient' approach centralizes disciplinary borderwork/border transgression as a methodology for interdisciplinarity and engaged research. This approach is a conceptual one that I present here as a model for others interested in engaging with urgent critical problems involving museums, politics, and society.[8] Rather than being prescriptive, it offers one possible way of recalibrating museum studies to highlight the importance of methodological clarity, engaged research work, and intellectual rigor for the practice of writing about museums. I have used the term 'disobedient museum' to describe this process of intellectual activism for two reasons. First, to disrupt traditional definitions and understandings associated with the traditional/canonistic terms of 'museum' and 'museology' (Desvallées

and Mairesse 2009) and, second, to demonstrate the analogies and connections that exist between politically engaged museum work and politically engaged writing about museums (extending the approach taken in Message 2014; Message 2015; Message and Witcomb 2015). Finally, the term is meant to challenge and extend traditional understandings of museums by arguing that the process of writing about museum politics is similar to many of the processes of meaning construction that museums undertake.

The book's attention to conceptual and disciplinary boundaries also aims to provoke discussion about the 'museum-like' spaces and activities that exist outside of or on the edges of formal museum spaces. An institutional example of a museum-like event is the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival. An example of an informal museum-like event is the January 2017, Women's March on Washington that took place on the National Mall, a location that Lonnie Bunch, Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, has called 'America's front lawn' (quoted in Cunningham 2016). Regardless of whether they are formal or informal and of the particular agenda they advocate (a pro-life or pro-gun rally on the Mall would also offer an informal example), these activities embody a form of cultural politics and are considered 'disobedient' because they are located at boundary sites or edges and simultaneously work across these borders, which are as much epistemic and structural as they are imaginary. Addressing diverse and heterogeneous audiences, these activities seek to produce sites that generate responses or exchanges that are positive, negative, or both. Rather than conforming with traditional museum definitions, the disobedient museum project is more closely aligned with the activities and agendas that I have described as being museum-like. The disobedient museum does not seek to progress an 'anti-museum' stance, and it does not offer a straightforward rejection of forms of governance, discourse, or disciplinarity but instead is a project space that identifies institutional edges as potential sites of affective action. The disobedient museum project is ultimately a form of intellectual activism that takes a variety of forms and outcomes (including writing, museums, rallies, marches, and other forms of political protest) to emphasize *processes* of borderwork that seek to transgress traditional disciplinary models and highlight new connections or reframe existing or new sites of conflict.

This book typically uses the disobedient museum concept to refer to a process or site of writing that emphasizes interconnections with processes used by museum activists, political protest and reform movements, and intellectual activism around practices of critique and self-reflexivity. It also aims to articulate the contributions that each of these three areas makes to the others. What impact does museum work have on public forms of protest? What influence does a critically reflective and engaged form of writing have on museum work? What are the collaborations that occur across

these three fields of action? As these questions (which are representative rather than exhaustive) indicate, the disobedient museum is a process that is expansive. And while this book touches on each of these three areas – Chapter 1 analyzes political protest, Chapter 2 interprets the effects of disciplinary crisis in this context, and Chapter 3 recommends modes for writing resistance – it is beyond the scope of the book to investigate the questions fully or to thoroughly examine the intersections that exist across each area. In the final instance, my overriding aim is to introduce the disobedient museum as a concept and an approach for thinking about how to write about museums. Subsequent publications in this series expand on this framework to explore the other areas in relation to case studies focused on specific interactions between museums and political actions, events, and protest (forthcoming titles include *Museums and Racism* and *Curatorial Activism*).

The book emphasizes frames of reference associated with critical theory (and social movement studies derived from sociology; also see Message 2015) in order to explore diverse approaches to understanding the relationships between collective action, contention, and museums in relation to public institutions that play a role in building and representing collective identity in the form of nationhood or other shared ideas of belonging. This approach has developed from my motivation to better understand the interactions between social structure – the macro and enduring set of (usually) orderly relationships between defining categories such as class, race, and ethnicity – and the more pragmatic institutional or governmental structures that regulate public policy making and guide museum procedures. In this context, the collective protest and reform movements that seek to challenge broader social structures impact on and are also influenced by institutional change and transformation. Disciplinary approaches toward analyzing this relationship are typically constrained by their own discourses and methodologies such that social movement theory, for example, has been criticized for its reticence to engage with cultural (and to an extent qualitative) elements of protest and for its inability to develop theoretical frameworks and forms of analysis relevant to activists and the causes they represent (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012; Message 2015: 253; Polletta 1997; Snow 2004). What has rarely been asked, from any singular disciplinary position, is what impact museums' (often behind-the-scenes) actions may have on progressing or supporting political change. An exception is a recent review of the National Museum of African American History and Culture by Steven W. Thrasher (2016), who asks, '[I]f the Oval Office can't help our cause, can a museum?'[9]

While it is true that not all museums (or museum writers) have explicitly political agendas, museums and writing about museums are never, regardless of intentions, benign or politically neutral activities. I have focused in

this book on connections between museums, writing, and social/political change because I see museum work and writing about museums as activities that are aligned to intellectual activism and that have the potential to make a greater contribution to political discourse and action than has perhaps been previously recognized. This potential is specifically related to the ability of museums and writing to occupy and explore edges that are disciplinary as well as social and political. While I agree for the most part with Thrasher's criticism that museums cannot easily act as explicitly political instruments (regardless of how *politicized* they may be), in some cases they can and do function as a bridge between 'the people' and their government to progress or facilitate change (as per the case studies in Message 2014). Where they do provide such an interface, it often results from a direct engagement (often 'behind-the-scenes') with protest and reform movements or by emphasizing relationships between political culture and cultures of political work and intervention within a space that is typically associated with structural conditions of power. Whether these actions are interpreted as a form of subversion against structural conditions or as the recuperation of forms of resistance is probably more subjective than measurable; however, in having the same expectations of museums and the Oval Office, Thrasher (2016) starts from the premise that museums are spaces that are potentially politically affective.

My interest in exploring the capacity of culture to act on politics has grown out of research and analysis conducted by others working across the fields of research in which I work. A specific influence has, of course, been museum studies, which has increasingly articulated a requirement that museums should not just be politically aware but actively and demonstrably engaged with political change, particularly around the themes of social justice, human rights, and climate change. As part of my broader project of engaging reflexively with the work of the museum studies, I have sought to hold this field accountable to its stated values and expectations. If there is a presumption that museums 'should' be politically engaged, the same must be said of writing about museums.

The issue here is that museum studies has no singular tradition of critique in the canonical modernist sense, which means we have no formal methodological framework to examine whether writing about museums is a form of intellectual activism. By extension, we lack the language required to identify and probe the impact it is making – be it on museums, on the field of writing, or on the broader sociopolitical context.[10] This situation has arisen partly because museum studies, like cultural studies, has 'committed itself neither to a set of particular methods or theories nor to particular objectives (is it managerial, populist, or critical?), although it does repeat a restricted set of problematizations, which, as we have seen, concern social ends as much as analytic frameworks' (During 2006: 278).[11] Rather than aiming to make a

case for the establishment of clearly defined parameters, I propose that the absence of a discrete formal tradition is a double-edged sword that is both paradoxical and productive, and that the tensions implicit here are useful to keep in play for anyone interested in understanding or testing the limits of conventional forms of thinking. We can understand the paradox as productive because museum studies, like other cognate interdisciplinary fields (such as heritage studies, Sørensen and Carman 2009a: 2) that have typically 'borrowed' discursive tools to address their specific research questions, have done so in order to develop responses to critical contemporary issues without being constrained by particular traditional forms of disciplinary critique (a point upon which cultural studies has, for instance, insisted, During 2006: 278). The trick, however, is to develop these strategies and frameworks (borrowed or not) in a way that is methodologically rigorous, in line with stated interests in grounded forms of analysis and a commitment to social justice agendas. A further paradox of this dichotomy is, of course, that interdisciplinarity is not one thing and that it cannot be defined by opposition, where writing is, for example, understood as being consistent with disciplinary norms *or* not.[12]

Recognizing the construction and impact of 'fields' – assemblages of institutions, disciplines, collections, sites of action – has become an increasingly popular and fruitful process in anthropology, museum studies, and art theory and criticism, among other disciplines.[13] My use of the term here is general. I refer to interdisciplinary fields of research like museum studies or cultural studies that have evolved predominantly in the postwar period (although they may have links with nineteenth-century disciplines, these interdisciplinary forms developed, at least to an extent, through a process of resistance against postwar pedagogical approaches that were criticized as being out of touch and for replicating and strengthening problematic relationships of power, authority, and subjectivity). I also use the term 'field' to refer to the interface between disciplinary configurations and between certain spatial arrangements, illustrated, for example, by spaces created by the boundary between museums and their physical verge (see Message 2014: 4 for a description of the National Mall in Washington, D.C., as exemplifying this boundary space and Rabinow's use of the term as described in Chapter 3 and at Guyer 2016: 373). While verges have traditionally been used to separate people, practices, power, and ideologies, they are also spaces that are inherently impure, touching as they do both sides of the boundary and providing, in so doing, a space of interaction, transgression, hybridity.

In addition to my interest in disciplinarity and exploring the limits of such, my approach has been influenced by recent attempts to identify and theorize various 'fields', including work associated with the recently completed Collecting, Ordering, Governing: Anthropology, Museums and Liberal Government project. While the Collecting, Ordering, Governing project does

not address the processes of contemporary activism that are my focus, it has been relevant for its analysis of the ways in which museums have historically acted on and been influenced by various interesting 'social worlds' and associated networks (Bennett 2015a, 2015b; Bennett, Dibley, and Harrison 2014; Bennett et al. 2017; Cameron and McCarthy 2015).[14] Similarly, although it employs a different set of theoretical parameters to examine governance than the cultural studies tools I offer in order to analyze resistance, this project has usefully built a case study of complex networks that existed across anthropology and museums at a particular historical juncture (the nineteenth century) in order to examine the limits, intersections, and processes of administration that occur through interaction across these zones. It shares my interest in examining the interfaces between those in power and those without (including activists known by contemporary social movement theory as 'challengers'[15]), particularly in relation to the role of culture, which is presented, pace Foucault, as a key interface, a transactional reality, that mediates 'the interface between the governed and the governing' (Bennett, Dibley, and Harrison 2014: 141).

Regardless of the specific theoretical angle adopted, the case study or site examined, or the historical era investigated, understanding museums as sets of relations or as 'assemblages' of fields and their constitutive elements (including the social networks between practices, materials, discourses, knowledges, and forms of administration)[16] is a useful exercise. Indeed, while I believe the terms and experiences of government and freedom should not be understood as diametrically opposed or dichotomous terms, it is critically important that any attempt to investigate resistance demonstrates a clear understanding of the application – direct and indirect – of power (particularly the formal apparatuses of 'social management'). This understanding can be facilitated by work coming out of the Collecting, Ordering, Governing project and its reading, in particular, of Foucault's account of liberal government 'as a set of knowledge practices and technologies that work through the forms of freedom they organize', the 'Latourian tradition of science studies and on the "archival turn" that has characterized recent revisionist approaches to the histories of anthropology and other collecting practices', and post-Deleuzian assemblage theory 'to analyze the agency of human and nonhuman actors in different sites of collection and in the passage of things, texts, and data from those sites of collection to centers of calculation' (Bennett et al. 2017: 4). It is also an approach that has its roots in contemporary reflections on anthropological theory and practice, which augments art historian Christopher Whitehead's Bourdieu-influenced contention that museums offer 'a unique site for a unique kind of theorizing, but such theorizing may well be inherently compromised by circumstance' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Whitehead

2009: 39). Complementing Bennett et al.'s exploration of nineteenth-century anthropology and museums in various colonial contexts, Whitehead's work addresses the engagement between museums and the disciplines of art history and archaeology across the same century (but in the context of Britain only). Although their respective approaches to rendering their fields of analysis differ from what is developed here, Bennett et al.'s focus on the ways in which museums act on social worlds (2017: 1) and Whitehead's argument that museums have played a direct role in the development of academic disciplines provide an important background context through which the disobedient museum – both as a book and a concept – operates.

The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge offers a workspace that exists within a much larger complex of organizational units – 'fields' if you like. In bringing together various disciplinary approaches, it offers a space where resistant forms of thinking, seeing, feeling, and acting can be produced, along with a platform from which to theorize this process as a form of protest against disciplinary stagnation. It does not set out to achieve 'coherence of a set of otherwise disparate elements: objects of study, methods of analysis', an outcome associated with the traditional process of disciplining (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, and Sylvan 1993b: 3). Neither does it aim to turn conventional knowledge upside down or render it baseless. Rather, it aims to suggest that crisis of any scale can offer a generative function that contributes to a process of reflection as well as the ongoing process of re-forming ways of addressing knowledges, experiences, and the networks and structures – macro and micro – through which contact occurs. The disobedient museum sits counter to the understanding that museums 'move through social space interpreting, fusing, and fissioning as they are caught in the cross-cutting pressures of fields' (Fyfe 1996: 210 quoted in Whitehead 2009: 39). Rather than accept the idea that the theorizing that takes place within any actual physical or virtual museum may be 'inherently compromised by circumstance', my approach seeks to prize open and occupy the place of 'cross-cutting' (a site of disciplinary interface) with the aim of articulating what happens at this place. How do the multiple agencies that occupy this localized, compromised, and contested space react to the dominant pressures around them? What is the process by which this 'field' of engagement can be articulated for the purpose of elaborating the role that museums play (as a similarly localized/contested space) to impact on broader political contexts and concerns?

The approach presented here differs from normative modes of museum analysis that have tended to focus either on ways that museums have acted on the social world (an historical example would be the colonial processes of collecting, and a contemporary one would be museum-run community development initiatives) or the impact that external factors have had on museum operations

(such as a change of government and reduction in funding or change in ideological position). More recent work on the relational museum (Gosden and Larson 2007: 5; Morphy 2015) has provided a way to bring these foci into a shared space of analysis by looking at the trajectories of movement and influence that can be traced across internal and external spheres. *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge* builds on this work but focuses on the spaces of slippage that typically 'fall out' of conversations about power, privilege, and influence but which are anything but politically neutral. It is methodologically important to recognize these spaces pragmatically (who is included or excluded by museum activities) as well as in conceptual and disciplinary terms because they exist as an interface as well as a network between text (object of study) and a context (field of action), as well as a range of other false dichotomies that are often applied to museums (inside/outside, public/private, theory/practice, and so on and so forth).

This book's interest in expanding methodological possibilities for articulating difficult conceptual and disciplinary relationships is unconventional for museum studies, which typically subjugates or makes the process of writing about museums invisible to the outcomes that museums aspire to or achieve.[17] Benefits of traditional museum studies approaches include highlighting the social and political impact of museum work and, in some cases, modeling collaborative research projects that involve museums and writers, often with additional community-based stakeholders and 'expert-citizens' (Third 2016; Sandell 2016). Despite these strengths, one motivation for writing this book has been frustration on my part about the methodological deficit that I increasingly see in manuscripts, journal articles, and theses affiliated with museum studies. Excellent research problems and questions abound and are often well identified by researchers; however, an overreliance on the same tired conceptual tools is commonly exhibited in written work. Rather than asking what other approaches might be most suited to addressing specific research problems (and what, concurrently, might the research findings reveal about the discipline itself), I am frequently presented with work that is silent about the methodological choices made or that adopts a generic interdisciplinary approach without providing a rationale for why the 'theory' suits the challenge or evidence at hand.

If we want to hold museums accountable for claims that they are politically or socially affective, we must also recognize and be accountable for the fact that writing evidence, writing methodology, and writing theory are themselves key elements in work that seeks to make a difference – be it in academic terms or for a social impact or political change. I am not asking to renew calls for tools that 'measure' the impact of our work. Quite the opposite, I am arguing that we need to develop more rigorous understandings and debates around what critique is, how it works, and what its impact and limitations

might be in our field of research (Post 2009). This task requires attention to the basic, admittedly dry and difficult but fundamentally important, questions that include 'How does one write about the different modes of relating to the world as a researcher and what are their ramifications on what one produces as accounts of reality? . . . How does one integrate theory in the process of writing?' How can we make theory speak to social and cultural realities and vice versa? (Hage 2016). This approach also recognizes that forms of analysis that sit at the edge of disciplinary norms risk exposing the limits and shortcomings of such work – an outcome that is, of course, appropriate for any attempt to explore the legacies and potentials of disciplinary and interdisciplinary work today.

The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge has been designed with these questions and challenges in mind and as an attempt to draw attention to the importance and potential impact of critical writing within the academic field of museum studies. It also aims to highlight the relationship between our subjects (museums and political culture in this case) and the agency and positions we adopt in relation to processes of writing. Like the process of making museum collections, exhibitions, or buildings, writing is always about making and remaking representations, 'materializing the world and relationships within that world; because words do more than simply name the things for which they stand' (Webb 2016). Recognizing the ethical imperative of the writing we produce therefore requires recognition that writing is itself an inherently political activity regardless of whether we write to progress a political agenda or not. This book aims, as such, to set the agenda for a new approach to thinking about writing about museums and the engagement between museums and the contemporary social/political context within which they operate. It represents a provocation – as much to myself as a museum studies scholar as well as to others – to reflect upon and examine how we can more effectively address and contribute to the political project of culture in contemporary life. It articulates problems rather than solutions, and indeed I believe its contribution is initiating a process of self-reflection for our field. The process of answering some of the challenges and provocations posed here will not be for me or any individual to offer concrete solutions but will be likely an iterative and collaborative process that involves many participants. What will be important in future discussions is whether our work in writing about museums has made a difference in turning abstract principles into concrete concerns that both reflect and contribute to the movements that we seek to represent or engage with critically.[18]

In summary, this book provides a focus piece on the single concept of writing about museums. My intention is to resituate this practice so that it might have an influence on the field of political discourse by addressing culture as something that has remained largely unquestioned or unthought

about in approaches more commonly taken to the genre. Rather than taking for granted the generally accepted definitions of the concept of politics (or museums, for that matter), my argumentative strategies have been designed to reconfigure writing about museums as a political activity that functions as a potential intervention into mainstream political cultures. My broad definition of politics comes from *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, which offers the 'view that "politics" refers to the multiplicity of forces, structures, problems, and orientations that shape our collective life. Politics enters the frame wherever our lives together are staked and wherever collective action could make a difference to the outcome' (Political Concepts 2011). As 'no discipline possesses any hegemony over this critical space', and as the contribution of culture to political change has been underestimated, my attention to writing about museums is a timely exercise.

The concept of disobedience is central to this political 'intervention' because of its ability to reveal the increasing difficulties associated with forms of insistent or embodied opposition, and because it can model tactical forms of subversion that articulate transgression within a political/social context characterized increasingly by direct conflict over opposing political positions. Mobilizing Michel de Certeau's (1984) theorization of tactics and strategy, the disobedient museum offers a concept model as well as a description for a process of writing and critical engagement. Focused on processes that seek to transgress boundaries, it can be used to describe examples of political activism (Chapter 1), as well as processes involved in writing about actions and engagements (Chapters 2 and 3). Rather than offering a template or how-to guide or even a manifesto for politically engaged forms of writing about museums, the disobedient museum is, at its crux, a call for more methodologically engaged forms of writing and critical analysis about museums. While a case study of this approach will be presented in *Curatorial Activism* (Message forthcoming 2018b), which, as the companion piece for this book, examines a specific instance of political activism and museums in a current U.S. context, *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge* has been developed to set the key questions and theoretical parameters motivating the Museums in Focus series. I hope that this is a discussion to which many writers will contribute over the coming years.

Notes

1 Slogan from Occupy Finsbury Square as observed by Gledhill (2012: 342).
2 Social reform movements are defined most generically as a type of group action. Large, sometimes informal groupings of individuals or organizations, movements focus on specific political or social issues and aim to carry out, resist, or undo a social change. They can take different forms and can represent a variety of concerns and agendas under singular or shared banners. See Tilly and Tarrow

(2007: 187); Tilly (1978); Tilly (2008); and Bevington and Dixon (2007). For the relationship between social reform movements and museum activism, see Message (2014) and *Curatorial Activism* (Message, forthcoming 2018b).

3 *Knowledges: Historical and Critical Studies in Disciplinarity* (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, and Sylvan 1993a) is recognized as a key volume on the structuring of disciplines in academia.

4 Best and Kellner (1991) explain that 'where modern theories tend to see knowledge and truth to be neutral, objective, universal, or vehicles of progress and emancipation', postmodernism 'rejects unifying or totalizing modes of theory' as reductionist forms that 'obscure the differential and plural nature of the social field, while politically entailing the suppression of plurality, diversity, and individuality in favour of conformity and homogeneity'. Following Foucault, postmodern theories tend to 'detotalize history and society as unified wholes governed by a centre, essence, or telos', seeking to 'decentre the subject as a constituted rather than a constituting consciousness'.

5 My strategic use of disciplinarity, which focuses on highlighting the limits, flaws, and prejudices of the term rather than its integrity, contrasts with recent work by Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh (2013), which proposes a terminology of 'post-critical' and 'post-disciplinary' (an orientation that is similarly employed by Fraser and Rothman 2017: 5). In contrast with this book's focus on writing about museums, Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh (2013) target the role national museums have played historically in forming the art historical canon by isolating its aesthetic categories from the 'political' and 'theoretical' intellectual debates occurring beyond the museum (Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2013: 106). Despite employing different terms and forms of analysis, we share some concerns, notably over the approach taken by museum studies from the 1980s (Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2013: 44), the need for methodologically rigorous approaches (Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2013: 16), and the need for integrated approaches to working with and across theory and practice (Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2013: 221). The main methodological difference is their argument that 'in contrast to the disciplinary project, the post-critical seeks to formulate, confront and solve problems of the everyday through a dialogic method embedded in practice worlds. The basis of the position advanced resides in arguing that in the case of museology, the agency of disciplinary knowledge positions, based upon a critique of established, embedded and implicit knowledge practices of the museum, circulate in closed, self-serving networks' (Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2013: 226). Rather than looking at the potential for disruption within existing models, they argue that it is necessary to move outside the modernist paradigms and narratives of progress, freedom, and rationality, suggesting that the 'new conditions of knowledge production and exchange have led many to believe that knowledge reproduced through single disciplines and even in their combination and overlap in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary modes of research can no longer encompass multilayer realities and the complexities of their networks' (Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh 2013: 245).

6 Mitchell (1995: 541) calls 'indiscipline' the 'turbulence or incoherence at the inner and outer boundaries of disciplines.' He says (1995: 543):

> If a discipline is a way of insuring the continuity of a set of collective practices (technical, social, professional, etc.), "indiscipline" is a moment of breakage or rupture, when the continuity is broken and the practice comes into question. To be sure, this moment of rupture can itself become

routinized, as the rapid transformation of deconstruction from an "event" into a "method of interpretation" demonstrates. When the tigers break into the temple and profane the altar too regularly, their appearance rapidly becomes part of the sacred ritual. Nevertheless, there is that moment before the routine or ritual is reasserted, the moment of chaos or wonder when a discipline, a way of doing things, compulsively performs a revelation of its own inadequacy. This is the moment of interdisciplinarity that has always interested me. I think of it as the "anarchist moment".

7   There are other approaches to understanding the relationship between modernity and postmodernity, including those that focus on the role of the 'contemporary'. See Chapter 3 for further discussion; however, it is, by way of introduction, useful to note the argument by art historian and theorist Terry Smith (2009: 5) that '*Contemporaneity is the most evident attribute of the current world picture*, encompassing its most distinctive qualities, from the interactions between humans and the geosphere, through the multeity of cultures and the ideoscape of global politics to the interiority of individual being. This picture can no longer be adequately characterized by terms such as "modernity" and "post-modernity", not least because it is shaped by friction between antimonies so intense that it resists universal generalization, resists even generalization about that resistance' (italics in original).

8   The methodology employed in this book builds specifically on Message (2014) and Message (2015) and has developed directly out of the concerns first explored in Message (2009a) (see Chapter 3).

9   This question has been identified by some museums, museum writers, workers, and advocates as urgent. Attempts to prosecute the case that museums can make for social and political change have proliferated since Trump's election, building on the groundswell of action generated by the Black Lives Matter movement and #museumsrespondtoferguson, a social media initiative that was started to articulate the role that 'museums can and should play' in response to the shooting of the unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014. According to Jennings (2015: 97), 'the word "Ferguson" in museum discourse has come to refer not so much to the town and event as to larger concerns about race, racism, and the continuing lack of inclusion in our cultural spaces', also signaling a broader interest in activism by the museum sector that has also been debated in forums such as 'Should Museums Be Activists?' (MuseumNext 2017).

10 This is not to suggest that there is no precedent for *critical writing* (the distinctions between critique and criticism are explored in later sections of this book) but that museum studies does not determine a singular or unified formal approach, although it is the case that dominant trends or disciplinary associations exist in different university contexts and inflect the teaching of museum studies. Some programs and centers are aligned with anthropology programs, while others have emerged out of an association with sociology, art history, or literary studies. For example, Barrett (2011b) and Leicester University's School of Museum Studies 50th Anniversary International Conference (https:// globalcontemporarymuseum.com) have offered accounts of the historical development of museum studies in the UK and Australian contexts, respectively. Although there are differences with museum studies (in the role played in the field's development by nonuniversity institutions and external professional associations, for example), During's (2006) observations about the development

of cultural studies programs and departments in university contexts offer a useful point of reference for anyone interested in further exploring the disciplinary (university) context in which museum studies is positioned.

11 I have here used a quote about cultural studies rather than museum studies to demonstrate that a characteristic shared by many interdisciplinary endeavors is a concern with social relevance and impact rather than discursive or methodological integrity.

12 Indeed Mitchell (1995: 541) argued that while 'the category of interdisciplinarity is safely institutionalized', this does not necessarily restrict the potential impact of research undertaken at disciplinary edges.

13 Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defined the field as a network, or a configuration of relations between positions (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 96), that can span and overlap institutions and traditions, meaning that any analysis of its effects need also extend beyond 'the field' or its products (material and intangible) to the interactions between fields and the processes that influence (and are, in turn, influenced by) those actions.

14 Like Collecting, Ordering, Governing, *The Disobedient Museum: Writing at the Edge* starts from the premise that culture is 'not expressive of an essential set of relations between a people, place and way life but is a conjunctural and pliable articulation of those relations that derives its distinctive qualities from the creative, form-giving capacity of the people concerned' (Bennett 2015b: 555). Similarly, both projects examine (albeit in relation to the different contexts of the historical anthropology museum and the contemporary museum-like space of reform movements and public protest) how government comes to act 'not "directly upon individuals but indirectly through their incorporation within culture" . . . in ways that allow a balanced apportionment of the relations between government and freedom' (John Dewey quoted in Bennett 2014: 151–2). Collecting, Ordering, Governing also builds on the work of anthropologists working on 'the relational museum' concept (Gosden and Larson 2007: 5; Morphy 2015), who similarly represent museums as points at which various epistemological and intellectual ideas and practices interact (and in so doing also act upon one another). In different ways, the approaches outlined respectively by Bennett (2015a) and Morphy (2015), for example, extend Clifford's (1997) representations (including the contact zone) of the place of the field within anthropological practice by enlarging the scope of analysis to include the interactions between the field and the multiple sites and embodiments of agency that come together in entities including those labeled 'anthropological assemblages' (Bennett 2015b: 153).

15 Tilly (1978, 2008) defines political 'challengers' as subjects who lack routine access to decision makers. It is important to recognize, however, that individuals can identify with or 'belong to' different groups at varying times. The demographic make-up of 'challengers', can, as such, be diverse and changeable.

16 Bennett (2015b: 142) offers the term 'anthropological assemblages' as a means of engaging with the:

> ways in which, in their early twentieth-century forms, anthropological museums operated at the intersections of different socio-material networks: those connecting them to the public spheres of the major metropolitan powers, those linking them to the institutions and practices of colonial administration, and those comprising the relations between museum, field and university.

17 A similar argument has been made of heritage studies, which has been criticized for its lack of methodological reflection. In their analysis of the situation for

that field of research, Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and John Carman (2009b: 23) explain:

> Having developed as an in-between subject and with its practitioners working in academic institutions, governments and 'in the field', Heritage Studies . . . has paid scant attention to methods. This does not mean that methods have not been used, but rather that methods borrowed from a range of disciplines have been imported and the forms and relevance assumed rather than critically assessed.

18 As per my title quote for the conclusion of this book: 'Movements are born in the moments when abstract principles become concrete concerns' (Cobb 2017).

1 Political protest

Figure 1.1 Person wearing 'I can see November from my House too!' sticker at Restoring Honor rally, National Mall, Washington, D.C., August 28, 2010

Photograph by Kylie Message.

This photo has been haunting me. I took it on August 28, 2010, at the Restoring Honor rally at the Lincoln Memorial, the same location that Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his 'I Have a Dream' speech during the 1963 March on Washington, 47 years earlier to the day. Although it is one of hundreds of photographs I took that day, this is the image that stuck in my mind.[1]

The Restoring Honor rally was organized by Glenn Beck, a provocative and famously right-wing Fox News personality aligned with former

Republican presidential candidate Sarah Palin and the Tea Party movement. Although Beck had declared the event to be a 'nonpolitical' gathering for American patriots wanting to demand that faith and honor be restored to American government (Halloran 2010), he also claimed that its primary aim was to 'reclaim the civil rights movement' (Beck 2010a; Beck 2010b; Milbank 2010; Rich 2010). There was, however, little confusion about the ideological leaning of the event among the many thousands of participants and flag wavers at the Restoring Honor rally, many of whom brandished Tea Party slogans and insignia.[2] Signs of ambiguity were similarly absent among the smaller numbers attending the Reclaim the Dream march, organized by Al Sharpton and held later that day at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial construction site. Beck had reportedly scheduled his rally 'coincidentally', without being aware of the significance of the day. Unable to use the iconic Lincoln Memorial, the Sharpton-led march instead moved from Dunbar High School (the first high school for black students in the Washington, D.C. area) to the site of the almost completed Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial, close to the Jefferson Memorial. According to one media report, 'Tens of thousands descended on Washington today for one of the biggest culture clashes in decades – one that pitted an almost exclusively white crowd against one that was predominantly African-American. Both claimed the legacy of Martin Luther King' (MacAskill 2010).

Beck's appropriation of the language of the Civil Rights movement to serve the interests of a conservative and disaffected, predominantly white middle-class cohort undoubtedly contributed to the right-wing populism of the Tea Party rally. Criticized by some for 'hijacking' the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., he argued a connection between the Civil Rights movement (that would be more logically linked to the progressive populism of the Occupy movement that emerged the following year) and a white moral panic more commonly associated with the 1773 Boston Tea Party protest against taxation without representation. The latter genealogy is represented widely in familiar Tea Party slogans, such as 'Silent Majority No More!', 'Don't Tread on Me', 'Taxed Enough Already', and 'Don't Spread the Wealth; Spread My Work Ethic'. Beck's language also tapped into a backlash against political correctness, a perception that despite President Barack Obama's inclusive rhetoric, the white middle-lower-class American mainstream was being overlooked. The Tea Party rhetoric can be understood as reflecting an 'I want to matter too' mentality. Critical cultural theorist Lauren Berlant contends that this rhetoric articulates a feeling of exclusion:

> I want my friends, my group, to matter. Who matters? Why should group x [for example, Black Lives Matter] matter more, or first, or get more attention? It's hard for the formerly optimistic and unmarked

whites to *feel right* about other people mattering before they do, because they didn't know that their freedom was bought on the backs of other people's exploitation and exile from protection by the law. They thought their freedom was their property, constitutionally.

(Berlant 2016)

Although a clear affront to many social justice and civil rights advocates and activists, Beck's approach to defending what he perceived to be the 'real' majority against the powerful elites and vocal interest groups that control the political system was taken from an artillery more commonly associated with left-wing causes (Lassiter 2011). It can be seen as a direct inversion of cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall's advice for the political left to make use of liberal institutions and ideas in order to redirect them to its own purposes (in Robbins 2016). By appropriating the language of economic equality as a universal right for 'all' Americans, Beck offered a kind of privilege or exceptionalism by association for those attendees at the rally who had, following a speech by President Richard Nixon in 1969, come to identify as the 'great silent majority' (Nixon 1969). Instead of inventing new political and cultural terms of opposition, Beck co-opted contemporary (and often liberal) norms that already existed. In so doing, he also denied or at least raised questions about the 'naturalness' of any genealogical links between the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speeches with the parallel Reclaim the Dream march organized by Al Sharpton.

The politics on display that day were elaborate and antagonistic or defensive, and the imagery on the no-tax, no-big-government, no-healthcare, 'no-bama' posters, banners, T-shirts, and other paraphernalia followed suit. The homogeneity of visual messaging evident in most of my photographs from the day is consistent with Walter Benjamin's observation that the real work of commentary and politics occurs not with evidence presented by the image itself but with the subsequent process of captioning, framing, and 'naming' its significance (Benjamin 1997). Berlant agrees with Benjamin's analysis, saying: 'It is as though the aim of a collective political event has to involve converging on a caption that converts [the photograph of] a historical moment into an iconic event preserved from history's contingencies, people's memories, and ambivalence' (Berlant and Greenwald 2012: 73). Beck was certainly aware of the impact of 'naming' the significance of the event, as was demonstrated in his subsequent media statements about the National Museum of American History's solicitation of materials from the rally for its the national collections, an exchange that he duly reported as an endorsement of his political position (Beck 2010c; Groer 2010; for a detailed discussion of Beck's claims about the museum's interest, see Message 2014, 2017). The

symbolic 'universe' created by the elaborate staging of the event – that, importantly, was reproduced in most photographs published in media reports – created the impression that, unlike the participants wielding racist anti-Obama slogans, Beck's message was a middle-of-the-road one.

The 'I can see November from my House too!' sticker is part of the symbolic universe created by the rally.[3] As the image shows, the sticker and person wearing it offer an impression of moderation that in a 'normal' context might appear extreme but that, in the landscape created by the Tea Party rally, came across as reasonable, thereby imbuing Beck with a credibility that would be less likely to alienate middle America. Obama also knew how to mobilize the center to achieve this effect (and sway swing voters), a point explained in 2010 by political commentator, Tom Hayden, who says that while the president had typically been criticized for being too right leaning for most progressives, he required 'the existence of a disappointed left as proof that he commands the center' (Hayden 2011: 267). Beck's image of reasonableness followed this strategy of appealing to the middle ground and was, as such, produced as much through its contrast with the extremist slogans ('America: Love it or go back to Kenya') represented by some staunch anti-Obama Tea Party members as it was by its opposition to Obama's 'liberal' views. In other words, while the 'I can see November from my House too!' sticker was sedate in comparison to the ostentatious visual gestures evident that day, it provided a like signifier for Beck's middle-of-the-road messaging that further normalized his rhetoric by producing the effect of a political continuum in which Beck was placed centrally.

In her writing on activism, American author Rebecca Solnit argues that full engagement by political activists (which includes the potential to mobilize others) requires the ability to work across ideological divisions, to occupy a slippery position of discursive as well as ideological liminality. Although Solnit (2006) was writing about progressive (left-wing) rather than conservative (right-wing) political activism, this is the approach used by Beck in his attempted recuperation of the language of Martin Luther King, Jr. Beyond the obvious currency to be gained by an association (however real) with the Civil Rights movement, his appropriation of the language 'of the left' was a powerful tactic for demonstrating the value of refusing, rejecting, or blurring ideological picket lines. It allowed Beck to occupy a liminal space where he could speak directly to people who identified with a variety of positions across the political spectrum. In appearing to take an approach that was inclusive of people of varying degrees of commitment, from moderate to extreme, the Tea Party at that moment succeeded in building a sense of movement – or alliance building. Obama's own approach to lobbying throughout his election campaigns was likely also an influence on this process. In appealing to people to act like 'the people', said Berlant

(2011: 238), Obama encouraged Americans to be politically engaged citizens involved in activities such as voting and demonstrating. He sought, said Berlant, to incite people to act 'as if their activism would bring about a change that was bigger than their new attachment to activism or to him' (Berlant 2011: 238). Obama's encouragement of active citizenship influenced conservatives such as Beck and further fueled the growing backlash by 'the left (people identified as anti-war, anti-class inequality, anti-racist, antihomophobic, antimisogynistic)' against Obama on the grounds that he was a 'neo-liberal market man without any left bona fides' (Berlant 2011: 238). While some elements of this backlash were manifested by the Occupy movement a short time later, the backlash was criticized by Solnit and others on the grounds that it alienated people who were not radical enough, including those who continued to support Obama, even if in a measured form (Solnit 2012).

Framing optimism

I attended the Restoring Honor and Reclaim the Dream events in 2010 to collect data for a book I was writing about museums and social activism (Message 2014). I had commenced working on the book sometime after Obama made his 'Audacity of Hope' speech to the 2004 Democratic Convention (Obama 2004) but prior to the presidential campaign of 2008,[4] and it was completed a couple of years after the Tea Party rally. The book's content covered a period from the late 1950s through to 2013, and investigated interactions between social justice movements and museums in the United States, focusing specifically on the Smithsonian Institution from the era of the National Museum of American History's establishment and burgeoning Civil Rights movement and including the early days of tribal Native American activism as it pertained to regional cultural center development. My initial aim for the book was to map a chronology of activism-based interactions between national museums and the public sphere across several decades. However, the process also led to an unintended outcome of profiling a period of optimism in public and political culture in the United States (vis-à-vis this lens of cultural politics/museum activism) that characterized the roughly seven-year writing period.

This seven-year period has been identified by many people – from Obama through to Beck (in his Restoring Honor speech, Beck 2010d) – as one of hope or optimism, partly, it might be suggested, due to a collective desire for it *to be so*. This desire to feel – or demand – inclusion and representation within and connection to political narratives reflected a contrast with the immediately preceding period, which Solnit characterized as one of tremendous despair and helplessness caused by the Bush administration