THE SPECIAL VISITOR:
EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US

LE VISITEUR PARTICULIER: CHACUN ET N'IMPORTE LEQUEL D'ENTRE NOUS

EL VISITANTE ESPECIAL:
TODOS Y CADA UNO DE NOSOTROS

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to say that every visitor has a unique, unclassifiable identity? I return to the rhetorical sense of identity as action, the sense that museums and their visitors are a discourse community in which each individual—be they visitor or staff—is actively engaged in building a common story/identity that does not exist in reality but (to borrow Benedict Anderson’s phrase) is instead an imagined community. To put it another way, this paper deals with how individuals in museums invoke their own group identities with which to identify. I argue that one way to look at this invocation/identification process is through the lens of what modern rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke called a personalizing of essence: the individual characteristics that make up one’s personal identity narrative are translated into an abstract reflection, then translated back into a narrative now larger than oneself—a persuasive narrative of self in society. Burke’s description of this temporal/ontological shift is very much the process described by psychologists for narrating one’s life story and by museologists for the identity work done by individuals in museums when confronted by a series of artifacts and a wall of stories. All visitors are indeed individuals, just as are all the individuals represented by the objects we now gaze at in our museums—and thus, paradoxically, we share commonalities of identity of which personalizing serves to remind us.

RÉSUMÉ

L'identité de l'individu / L'histoire de la collectivité : dans le musée, il faut personnaliser ce qu'est l’essence

Que veut-on dire lorsqu’on maintient que chaque individu a une identité unique que l’on ne peut classer ? J’évoque le sens historique de l’identité en tant qu’action, le sens où les musées et leurs visiteurs forment une communauté de discours dans laquelle chaque individu – qu’il soit visiteur ou fasse partie du personnel – s’engage activement dans la construction d’une histoire / identité commune qui n’existe pas dans la réalité mais (et j’emprunte une expression de Benedict Anderson) qui est plutôt une communauté imaginaire. Autrement dit, l’article traite de la manière dont les individus font appel aux identités de leur propre groupe auquel ils s’identifient. Je maintiens qu’une façon d’envisager ce processus d’appel/ identification, que le théoricien rhétorique contemporain Kenneth Burke dénomme la personnalisation de l’essence : les caractéristiques qui composent un récit personnel de l’identité se traduisent en un reflet abstrait de l’image, lequel ensuite se traduit en un récit qui est plus grand que le soi-même – c’est à dire en un récit persuasif du soi-même dans la société. La description de Burke de ce déplacement temporel / ontologique ressemble beaucoup au processus décrit par les psychologues lorsqu’une personne raconte l’histoire de sa vie, et le processus des muséologues qui travaillent sur l’identité des individus lorsqu’ils présentent une série d’artefacts ou bien un mur d’histoires. Tous les visiteurs sont bien entendu des individus, tout comme tous les objets que nous contemplons dans le musée représentent des individus – et
ainsi, paradoxalement, nous partageons une communauté d’identité dont la personnalisation sert à nous en souvenir.

RESUMEN

Identidad Individual / Historia Colectiva: Personalizando Esencia en el Museo

¿Qué significa decir que cada visitante tiene una única, inclasificable identidad? Vuelvo al significado retórico de identidad como acción, el significado en que los museos y sus visitantes son una comunidad de discurso en la cual cada individuo - sea visitante o personal del museo - participa activamente en la construcción de una historia / identidad común que no existe en la realidad, sino (para tomar prestada la frase de Benedict Anderson) es en cambio una comunidad imaginada. Para decirlo de otra manera, este artículo trata la forma en que las personas en los museos invocan sus propias identidades de grupo con la que se identifican. Sostengo que una manera de mirar este proceso de invocación / identificación es a través del lente de lo que el teórico de la retórica moderna, Kenneth Burke, llama personalización de la esencia, donde las características individuales que componen la narrativa propia de la identidad personal se traducen en una reflexión abstracta y, a continuación, traducido de nuevo en una narrativa ahora más amplia que la propia -una narrativa convincente de sí misma en la sociedad. La descripción de Burke de este salto temporal / ontológico es en gran medida el proceso descrito por los psicólogos para narrar nuestra propia historia de vida y por los museólogos para el trabajo identitario que hacen los individuos en los museos cuando se enfrentan con una serie de artefactos y un muro de historias. Todos los visitantes son en realidad individuos, como son individuos todos los representados por los objetos que ahora se contemplan en nuestros museos -y, por tanto, paradójicamente, que comparten elementos comunes de identidad que la personalización nos sirve para recordar.

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Every visitor brings to the museum his or her individual characteristics—the introduction to this year’s call for papers is such a truism that we almost read past it, looking for the new information. Yet what does it mean to say that every visitor has this unique, unclassifiable identity? Social scientists William Penuel and James Wertsch conclude an influential article on identity noting that rather than an essence it is “a form of action that is first and foremost rhetorical, concerned with persuading others (and oneself) about who one is and what one values to meet different purposes.”¹ Rhetorical action—yet since Aristotle’s Rhetoric first advised budding public orators 2500 years ago to know their audience by knowing the group characteristics of their audience, rhetoric as a field has struggled with how to consider an audience of individuals. As rhetorical scholars Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford argued in their ongoing examinations of audience, because the rhetorical tradition aims for successful communication, it risks excluding or disenfranchising those whose difference from some imagined audience norm makes success more difficult to achieve.² The communication goal, in other words, encourages the illusion not of self-identity but sameness. Thus we continue to encourage our student writers and speakers to either learn the characteristics of their


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audience, or imagine the characteristics of their audience, or create the characteristics of their audience by the information and context that they provide. At the same time, a parallel theoretical tradition has held, as James Porter put it in *Audience and Rhetoric* in 1992, that audience should be considered not as the end recipient of the information-dissemination process but as a “discourse community” actively engaged with the rhetor, working with them to build not only a common story but also a common identity. This notion of the *engaged* audience has never been truer than in today’s era of interactive media.

We can see these same issues debated over—struggled with—in museum studies. Should museologists engage in visitor studies to learn their audience? How much can they extrapolate from those data to imagine the whole self that is their visitor? To what degree should professionals create or invoke the desired characteristics in their visitors by certain displays, particular texts and artifacts, lighting, flow patterns, etc.? And what about interaction—how to engage the visitors with touch screens, provocative questions, reflection zones, and all the rest?

With the range of concerns facing museum professionals and museologists already, adding that museum-goers cannot be defined only as group members but also as individuals seems to add just one more layer of complexity to an already impossible identification project. John Falk’s attempt to categorize these individuals not by their demographic characteristics but instead by their need to perform their identity with one of five roles (Explorer, Facilitator, Experience seeker, Professional/Hobbyist, Recharger) can be seen, in this light, as merely a different (if a better, more accurate) kind of grouping for the “individual characteristics” each visitor brings. In this short paper, therefore, I plan to return to the rhetorical sense of identity as action, the sense that museums and their visitors are a discourse community in which each individual—be they audience/visitor or rhetor/museum staff—is actively engaged to build a common story and identity that does not exist in reality but (to borrow Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase) is instead an *imagined* community. As Penuel and Wertsch note, identity “is always addressed to someone, who is situated culturally and historically.” To put it another way, this paper deals with how individuals in museums invoke their own group identities with which to identify.

I argue that one way to look at this invocation/identification process is through the lens of what modern rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke called a *personalizing of essence*, in which the individual characteristics that make up one’s personal identity narrative are translated into an abstract reflection, then translated back into a narrative now larger than oneself—a persuasive narrative of self in society. Burke’s description of this temporal/ontological shift is very much the process described by psychologists for narrating one’s lifestory and by museologists for the identity work done by individuals in museums when confronted by a series of artifacts and a wall of stories. I will use the latter to return to Burke’s personalizing in order to describe the idiosyncratic identification of individuals with the communities invoked by museums.

Identity, as popular and important as it is in the scholarship of multiple disciplines, is a tricky concept to define, but all identity theories have in common a dual internal-external focus on the *self in society*. Some theories, following the line of psychologists like Erik Erikson, focus more on the individual, personalized nature of identity as the choices made to define ourselves, while others focus more on the social forces that enable and constrain these choices, perhaps most famously articulated by sociologist Anthony Giddens’ duality of structure—that we make the structures that in turn constrain us in our potential choices—now a cornerstone of modern sociology. Giddens

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5 Penuel & Wertsch, 91.

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recognizes that in modern societies, identities are becoming dislodged from the traditional collectivist structures such as location and kinship such that, while still constrained, they are more individualized. In other words, we must form our sense of self with less of a pre-written script than earlier people.

This script exists as a narrative of our past lives and roles, unified into the story of our self-identity. Social psychologists Robyn Fivush and Catherine Haden explain that individuals construct a self-identity by selecting past episodes which seem particularly meaningful or relevant to their present quest for selfhood, mining their own memories for nuggets of self-understanding. But they do not simply leave the memories alone; any more than modern museums leave objects alone on an examination table: these life episodes are crafted into what the psychologists call a lifestory, a narrative of identity. "It is through the construction of a lifestory that self and memory are intertwined," Fivush and Haden write, and the lifestory is built upon "social interactions or cultural frameworks that lead to the formation of an autobiographical narrative." Shaping the selected pieces of one's random memory into something that contains the two essential qualities of narrative—linearity and causality—allows individuals to make meaning of their life. As Fivush and Haden put it, "Life stories are based on autobiographical episodes, but to a considerable extent reflect efforts to portray oneself in a way that makes sense within one's social and cultural context." Narrative psychologist Dan McAdams adds that until one is old enough to endow one's lifestory with linearity and causality (McAdams calls these unity and purpose), identity itself is not fully realized. Such a sense of self-identity, McAdams says, is achieved through both a synchronic integration, uniting the different roles each of us plays into a "me," and a diachronic integration, uniting our divergent life choices into one coherent timeline. In an individual these integrations might mean unifying into one coherent lifestory the roles of scholar/teacher/mother/deacon/aspiring guitarist and the timeline of majoring in music before becoming a mathematician, living in three cities, getting divorced and remarried. In a national museum it might mean unifying a history of wars, invasions and plagues, and a diversity of multiple waves of immigrants into the unity of the nation.

Combining the concept of the lifestory narrative with Falk's performative roles, then, we can easily imagine ourselves walking into, say, the British Museum, confronted with the Rosetta Stone and the colossal bust of Ramesses II and the rest of the monumental artifacts of past civilizations and incorporating Falk's role of Explorer into whatever personal narrative we tell ourselves about ourselves. Like actors playing Hamlet, each individual brings to the role a unique sensibility, but if the role can be made to fit our context—and the British Museum carefully encourages the context of Explorer as their display pattern requires visitors to walk around each artifact and to weave their own path from object to object—then we can unify it synchronically (as one of the roles we play) and diachronically (as consistent with other times when we have "explored") into our sense of self.

Not everyone agrees with this interpretation of museum work. The European National Museums consortium (Eunamus), a multiyear international study with which I worked last year, puts it bluntly in their final report:

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8 Fivush & Haden, viii.
10 McAdams, 188-89.

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National museums are about history: Most visitors surveyed said they came to national museums for social reasons, for entertainment and education. They did not visit with the intention of developing, understanding or crystallising their national identities. They believed these museums were about history, not identity.\footnote{Eunamus. European National Museums Making Histories in a Diverse Europe. Linkoping, Sweden: Linkoping University Electronic Press, 2012, 28.}

It is indeed true that museum-goers do not label their own identity-construction as a goal of their visit—but neither, really, does Falk, who discusses museums as “settings that allow visitors to play [a] role”—\footnote{Falk, 64.}—\footnote{Rhiannon Mason, “Communities and Redisplay at the Laing Art Gallery,” University of Leicester School of Museum Studies Research Seminar Series, 24 Oct. 2012.} not take on a role but perform one. The difference in viewpoint may lie in Falk’s sense of the “inter-animation” of the competing dialogues within the public space of the museum: museums narrate history, visitors narrate an individual identity that interacts with that history—and both of these performances of reality interact to create the continually replicated but always unique memory narrative of an exhibit.

The identity narrative, in other words, may be unified into the lifeforce of each individual visitor, but (as theorists such as Falk and Rowe \emph{et al.} have documented), it is far from univocal. In some museums the multivocality, or what literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin called the polyphony of multiple competing voices, is embedded into the narrative crafted by museum staff: “Ask any ten people what it means to be Australian and you are likely to get ten different answers,” reads a prominent sign in the Australian National Museum. Whether or not the polyphony is intended, though, it is always present, carried into the museum by the visitors themselves. Museologist Rhiannon Mason described in a recent presentation the experience of listening to residents of Newcastle visiting an exhibit of maritime artwork. The visitors did not discuss with each other painterly techniques or camera angles—they talked about their own memories of watching ships being launched or time spent on the water.\footnote{Lisa C. Roberts, From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, 137.} Such personal memories might serve to tie an individual to the collectivity represented by a museum display, but perhaps in a more idiosyncratic way than desired. As museum educator Lisa Roberts states,

In any given museum, visitors will probably encounter the same raw material: an entryway, exhibits, and perhaps a restaurant or gift shop. However, each will come away with an individually unique experience and interpretation because every visitor is engaged in constructing a narrative about what he or she sees.\footnote{Gregory Clark, Rhetorical Landscapes in America, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004, 4.}

Of course, as I have here begun to imply, museums themselves contribute to the creation of the conditions for Giddens’ structure as a constraint on the narrative of our potential identity choices. As rhetorician Greg Clark argues regarding a different kind of rhetorical space (significant landscapes), we are encouraged by the material provided us to endow what we are looking at with collective meaning and then to determine our stance toward that meaning, and thus we are “prompted to recreate [our]selves in the image of a collective identity.”\footnote{Elizabeth Weiser, “Who are We? Museums Telling the Nation’s Story,” in International Journal of the Inclusive Museum, 2.2 (2009), 29.} As I wrote in an earlier article regarding the plethora of artifacts in vitrines lining the entry corridors greeting visitors to the National Museum of American History—everything from scientific measuring devices to the TV-show typewriters—“the visitor is confronted with three messages about America: its material culture is vast, it is indeed diverse, and it boasts a radical egalitarianism in which everything is, potentially, a ‘treasure of the American past’.”\footnote{M. Elizabeth Weiser Individual identity / collective history: personalizing essence in the museum}
identity, as displayed, is not that of the nation of the Rosetta Stone and the head of Ramesses, of Winged Victory and the Mona Lisa, or of other symbols of imperial power and cultural triumph—it is instead of the nation of the ruby slippers and a farmer president’s battered top hat. Their presence in the national museum provides a more populist collective identity with which visitors are asked to identify. It may not be consistent with visitors’ personal lifestory, or even with their understanding of the lifestory of America—but our ability to “change the narrative” and incorporate new identities into an ongoing synchronic/diachronic selfhood should not be overlooked.

As an example, we can look at the resurrection of Amir Temur in museums in Uzbekistan. He is perhaps best remembered in the West as the “scourge of God” title character in Christopher Marlowe’s bombastic Renaissance play Tamburlaine, but in modern Uzbekistan he is the personification of national identity. The State History Museum of the Temurids in Tashkent, for instance, founded five years after Uzbek independence from the Soviet Union, recounts and celebrates the life of Temur seven centuries after his rise to power in Samarkand. As cultural historian Timur Dadabaev notes, the post-Soviet discourse in Uzbekistan evokes the glorious ethnic past as a counter to a long-term Soviet discourse that emphasized “civilizing” underdeveloped Central Asia. Thus as independent Uzbekistan (re)constructs a national identity it is not surprising to find that Temur—conqueror of much of Central Asia, patron of the arts and sciences, ethnically non-Russian, and founder of the last “golden age” dynasty of the region—has taken on a mythic status. He is perhaps particularly promoted by the country’s only president, Islam Karimov, and visitors to the State History Museum can read Karimov’s assertion on a marble wall plaque:

If somebody wants to understand who the Uzbeks are, if somebody wants to comprehend all the power, might, justice, and unlimited abilities of the Uzbek people, their contribution to the global development, their belief in the future, he should recall the image of Amir Temur.

The modern Uzbek visitor, then, is encouraged toward a particular constrained kind of identity—not only of pride in Uzbek nationhood but of an Uzbek collective identity that values what the museum’s walls proclaim as Temur’s values: Justice, Enlightenment, Honour, and Friendliness. Whether and to what extent the visitor engages with that identity as part of his/her personal narrative is idiosyncratic—but what is not so idiosyncratic are the parameters of the collective identity the visitor has available to choose from. And I do not mean to say that the State History Museum has more of an agenda of collective identity than any other national museum, for, as Peter Aronsson, director of the Eunamus project, asserts, any national museum

is part of the arena where these forces [of contemporary individuality and commonality] are negotiated, no doubt with a certain tendency to articulate the communality and the virtue of the national community, but at the same time hinting at what the desired virtues of individual citizens ought to be, giving a broad audience an ambitious opportunity to participate in the making of individual identity and community by the practice of making the museum.

The interaction between individual visitor narratives and the museum narrative, or what John Bodnar calls vernacular and official narratives, interact in at least four ways, write researchers Rowe, Wertsch, and Kosyaeva, some of which serve to bolster the official narrative and others of which deflect or negate it. Visitors’ stories, they say, might simply use the official story as a jumping off point for their own narrative, but they might also work to link the individual—or their audience—more closely to the larger

17 Timur Dadabaev, “Power, Social Life, And Public Memory In Uzbekistan And Kyrgyzstan,” in Inner Asia 12.1 (2010), 32.

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narrative.¹⁹ Say I am standing in the Museum of Westward Expansion in St. Louis, Missouri, looking at an artifact like explorer Meriwether Lewis’s compass. If I am reminded by it of my grandfather’s pocket watch from his work on the Panama Canal, that might serve to deflect me from the official narrative of Western exploration in 19th century North America. However, as Rowe et al. note, I might then continue on to discuss the role of timepieces, the Canal, or my own grandfather in US expansionism—all of which would be ways of bringing my personal narrative more in line with the official one, and thus encouraging me to identify more closely as I interact with it.

In fact, the personal memories of individual visitors are triggered as never before by modern museum displays because collections of personal narratives have become so central. In the Imperial War Museum North (England) with its highlighted soldiers’ letters and personal quotes; in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum with its personalized permanent exhibit “Remembering the Children: Daniel’s Story”; in the Ethiopian National Museum, where four million years of hominid ancestors are manifested in the personalized fossils of Ardi, Lucy, and the Tang Child; and on and on, large historical events are commonly told through the lens of individual lives. Beyond this kind of personalized experience, however, some museums are also narratologically constructed to demand a response from their newly engaged audience on an individual level.

I see three approaches used repeatedly around the world to encourage this kind of individual visitor engagement with personalized narrative. First, individuals are asked to give the museum their own personal narratives, thus implying that the visitor’s lifestory is synecdochally connected to the official story presented back to the visitor. Synecdoche, the rhetorical trope whereby a part stands in for the whole or the whole for the part, places the seemingly idiosyncratic individual narrative within the collective. For instance, in the “Eternity” exhibit at the National Museum of Australia, light boards display the lifestories of 50 Australians—some famous or historically significant, others not. Australian visitors are encouraged by the opening sign to take these personal narratives as exemplars and add their own stories to the collection:

Share all the emotion as the selected stories unfold. And you’re invited to add your own: in writing, through video, via sounds. Laugh. Feel fear. Fall in love. Take a chance.

As synecdoche, each person’s narrative is not a reduction from the greater whole, not less than the national story, it becomes instead its own embodiment of the whole. As synecdoche, each person’s story is a unique microcosm of the whole nation’s story. Burke noted that synecdoche “stresses a relationship or connectedness between two sides of an equation”—²⁰—in this case, between the vernacular narratives of the individual visitors and the official narratives of the museum.

Second, museums invite the visitor to take on the role of a participant in the official story, thus asking them to unify this other unique identity into their own lifestory as they reflect on what it would be like to be that particular individual. For instance, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is famous for its use of identification cards given to each visitor who enters the permanent exhibit. Each card gives information, with photo, of a real person, along with the narrative of their wartime life. Receiving this card at the beginning of the exhibit encourages visitors to enter the chronological journey through the 1930s and 40s with a dual identity—their own and that of someone who suffered the effects of the history on display. Similarly, the Apartheid Museum (South Africa) informs visitors that their “ticket to the museum has randomly classified you as ‘white’ or ‘non-white.’ Please use the entrance . . . indicated.” Visitors assume the dual

identity and pass through separate turnstiles into two parallel tunnels made of wire-mesh cages that contain enlarged identity cards of similarly white/non-white individual South Africans. The narrative then forces not only cross-racial identification but also makes an argument about the “randomness” of such classification as designated “white” and “non-white” visitors stand together at the end before a large photo of one of the review panels that determined each person’s race.

Finally, museums ask visitors to directly incorporate their own individualized lifestory into that of the official museum display, not as a separate identity but as if they were in fact made over into someone else. Historical museums everywhere invite child visitors to dress up in the costumes of another age, and sophisticated walk-through displays invite visitors to feel what it was like to be in a slave holding pen or a World War I trench or a primeval rainforest or (in living history museums) any number of old-time villages. But the Museum of Boca Juniors Passion (Argentina) takes its “this is you” approach to cinematic levels. The museum is tucked into the wall of La Bombonera, the iconic soccer/football stadium of the Boca Juniors team in the old working class neighborhood of the capital city. Visitors to the Museum are ushered into an introductory room encircled by large screens showing in 360 degrees a film shot from the perspective of the visitor. With the camera serving as the visitor’s eyes and the narration employing the second person (“You run, trap and kick”), “you,” a youth in the poor neighborhood of La Boca, can trace “your” first discovery by scouts for the Club, through endless practices with fellow aspirants, to “your” first big chance on goal and heartbreaking miss, and then to “you” working harder than ever, practicing, finally running onto the field at La Bombonera, where the crowds surround “you” with screaming, foot-stomping cheers, and “you” and your teammates face off against your rivals, waiting your chance, until suddenly a teammate passes you the ball—and there are your legs, running, dodging, shooting in a long arc . . . and scoring! Since it is a safe guess that this is the dream story of nearly everyone who comes to this museum, its enactment on film immediately invites the visitor to take on a new identity (not merely fan but player) and so connect with the “passion” that is the stated purpose of the museum—which is, after all, not devoted to the Boca Juniors but to the “Pasión Boquense.”

All three methods of visitor engagement demonstrate the links that are forged between the narration of a lifestory (one’s own or one adopted) and one’s identity (again, one’s own or one adopted)—which is then presented back to the visitor as a piece of the collective identity of all the other individuals around him/her—or to return to my original argument, what Burke named the “personalizing of essence.”

Toward the end of Burke’s A Grammar of Motives, he began to explore the relation between ontology and history, things in their essence and things in time. He noted that narrative must by its nature historicize occurrences that do not actually happen temporally because narrative requires linearity. That is, one’s essence, who one is, being translated into narrative becomes the story of one’s origins, where one came from.21 Burke’s example is that calling someone a “bastard” maligns his essence by reference to his origins. I witnessed a larger example of this essence-origin translation in Australia in 2008 during a national campaign entitled “All of Us” that celebrated the new Australian identity by collecting stories and photos of Australians. As its website still explains, the project aimed to graphically illustrate the amazing cultural diversity in Australia today. The candidates [for photos] must have been born overseas, preferably in their country of origin.22


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The ontology of their Australianess was determined by their temporal origin. When Burke returned to this temporizing theme five years later, he added that one could classify an essence not only in terms of its origins but also “in terms of its fulfillment or fruition, conceiving of its kind according to the perfection . . . of which that kind is capable.”

He went on, “In either choice (the ancestral or the final) the narrative terminology provides for a personalizing of essence.” The abstraction that is the essential is brought into time, personalized, narrated into a causal timeline that then—as one explores with one’s fellows the collective history presented in the museum—interacts with that collective history in a way that promotes identification with the larger story by infusing individual acts with the more unifying ideal. It is in this sense that, as museologist Jay Rounds argues,

Visiting a museum is both about construction of identity and signaling of identity . . . museums offer opportunities of affirming our identity, but they also offer a safe environment where we can explore other identities and gain materials to ‘construct’ ourselves.

They do this, again, not consciously, not as the reason for visiting the museum, but as a consequence of one’s engagement there. Burke discussed this engagement phenomenon as identification, “any of the wide variety of means by which [a rhetor] may establish a shared sense of values, attitudes, and interests with [an audience].” If Aristotle founded the Western rhetorical tradition around the notion of persuasion, Burke said that its persuasive force is found not in rational argument but in human interactions: “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language . . . identifying your ways with his.” This identification process is inevitably engaging with an audience of individuals, each with their own shifting mix of “speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea,” as Burke says. Far from lamenting this shifting ambiguity, however, he celebrated it as the human condition.

Faced with endless examples of the process of individual engaged identification with a shifting collective identity, let me end with two museums of New World indigenous culture. In the “Our Peoples” exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian, an introductory sign asserts the individuality of precontact indigenous people:

The people who live here are engineers and artists, cooks and dreamers, hunters and students. They are scientists and kings, farmers and revolutionaries. They aren’t ‘Indians.’ They have never heard of ‘America.’

We are strangers to them—but by providing these unknown individuals with familiar titles, the sign provides a way for modern visitors, also engineers and artists, hunters and dreamers, to identify our own ways with those of these peoples—they are not strangers to us. All visitors are indeed individuals, just as are all the individuals represented by these objects we now gaze at in our museums—and thus, paradoxically, we share commonalties of which personalizing serves to remind us. As Adolfo Lopez Mateos, the President of the Republic of Mexico, noted on the inauguration of his country’s National Archaeological Museum almost 50 years ago (a quote now carved into the museum’s entrance), “Faced with the testimonies of those

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24 Burke, *Rhetoric*, 15, emphasis Burke’s.
cultures, Mexico today pays tribute to indigenous Mexico, in whose example it recognizes characteristics of its national originality.\textsuperscript{29}

If identity, “emergent rather than permanent,”\textsuperscript{30} as Falk puts it, is not a static essence but a rhetorical action, then what modern rhetoricians remind us is that rhetoric itself is “the process of negotiating with others our notions of individual and collective identity”\textsuperscript{31}—and what better place to do that than within the dialogic museum?

Works Cited


\textsuperscript{29} “Frente a los testimonios de aquellas culturas, el México de hoy rinde homenaje al México indígena en cuyo ejemplo reconoce características de su originalidad nacional.” Translation and emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{30} Falk, 73.

\textsuperscript{31} Clark, 3.