



Cultural Co-Creation: Towards a Non- Representational Study of the Museum Visitor Experience

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ABSTRACT

Published research in the social sciences increasingly values what is countable over the numinous; it highlights the authoritative and atomizing over the convivial and felt. The term “datological turn” was coined to describe the shifts in how research has been conducted in the social sciences with the advent of digital tools for managing and comparing vast amounts of data. Research that privileges data short-circuits critical conversation by cloaking itself in scientific authority and, in the process, de-values the shared human experience. Proponents of non-representational theory, especially those working in museum and heritage studies, have responded with work that valorizes individual experience but stops short of intentionally placing it in conversation with others. As sites of institutional “memory-keeping” museums and heritage facilities are on the front lines of culture creation. These are the places where conversations happen in focused, intentionally constructed spaces highly susceptible to the pressures of authority and commerce. This paper builds on prior work in affective architectures and heritage sites to propose the concept of “cultural co-creation” as a means to describe the multitude of conversations we engage in together to construct a shared narrative of our human experiences. I argue that we, as interdisciplinary scholars, can make more meaningful contributions to the evolving narrative of culture by adopting a non-representational approach focused on studying and valorizing the conviviality of cultural co-creation. A truly interdisciplinary way to counter the datological turn suggests a synthesis of research methodologies and critical theory, especially those rooted in sociology. To illustrate how this might work in practice, I present a brief study employing Phil Smith’s method of the group *dérive* to explore the museum visitor experience and how it relates to cultural co-creation at the Regional Archeological Museum Antonio Salinas in Palermo, Sicily.

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It is impossible to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurement – that they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate what is of true value in life.

– [Sigmund Freud](#), *Civilization and its Discontents*

We have lost our immediate feeling for the great realities of the spirit ... lost it precisely because of our all-too-willing, helpful, and efficient science.

– [Karl Kerényi](#), *Science of Mythology*

I. INTRODUCTION

The “datalogical turn” in research privileges data as the only valid basis of critical inquiry, a trend that has spilled over into qualitative research and contributed to a “science-ification” of efforts to explore and valorize human experience. As a result, the academic mechanisms guiding how our cultures take shape now threaten their coherence as common narratives. The trend plagues cultural institutions and erodes our sense of participation in a unifying, communal process of culture creation. The aim of this article is two-fold: first, I present the concept of cultural co-creation to describe the ongoing social process to which we all contribute with embodied human acts of curiosity, research and creativity. Secondly, I explore how we might approach interdisciplinary research in a way that values rather than counts – an excursion into the territory of affective architecture and non-representational theory that builds on existing research in support of cultural co-creation. My brief study combines and applies these discoveries to create an example of non-representational research of the process of cultural co-creation centered on the visitor experience at the Regional Archeological Museum Antonio Salinas in Palermo, Sicily (subsequently referred to as the “Salinas Museum”).

The concept of cultural co-creation dwells restlessly within the rich field of non-representational theory as championed by Nigel Thrift and refers to the dialectical process we engage in together to contribute to an evolving story of human experience. The story is affected by, among many other things, interactions with culturally significant objects, spaces and their affective relationships to our own experiences. When we engage in cultural co-creation, the stories told of individual experiences of the present are shared with others and conspire together to create a mutually acceptable narrative that eventually becomes culture. There is no extradiegetic animus responsible for creating culture, nor does culture exist independent of the narrative of human experience. Encompassing and synthesizing history, ethnography, ideologies, language, societal norms and religious/ritual participation, a culture can be said to reflect the vector of consensus of a group of interconnected people as well as indicating the trajectory of that group’s continuing evolution. Culture is the story we tell each other as we travel, constructed to remind us of where we’ve been and where we aim to go. If a culture is to thrive, it must be constantly synthesized and shared by its members. Culture must be co-created.

At the end of the day, academic research is simply another voice with which to tell the story – a formally stylized record of our shared effort to make culture, all dressed up for a night out. It is typified by qualitative or quantitative approaches to gathering and analyzing data and is subject to certain rules that facilitate legibility, especially to other academics. When this mode of storytelling interacts with the world outside of academia, however, challenges arise. If these stories (which we position as research) are told with the aim to inspire, instruct and engage, they take on a life of their own and spread. But if our research relies on hermetic models to assemble and analyze mountains of data, we aren’t telling a story but seeking to establish authoritative dominance. Our research becomes the know-all bore at a party who everyone ignores and our stories cease to be included in the conversation.

If the stories told by our research don’t stick then they aren’t shared, and culture itself begins to erode and collapse, making the datalogical turn and the underlying systems that sustain it destructive of culture – not simply a bugbear of the cynical luddite or elitist crank. Thanks to the datalogical turn our thoughts, opinions and exchanges are valorized on the sole basis of numerical comparison and superiority. We quickly cease engaging in conversations that describe and value human experience when we are isolated from each other inside digital bubbles and, in the absence of a coherent narrative we can all agree on, culture falters.

As an example of how the datalogical turn works counter to cultural co-creation, I look to the museum visitor experience and how it is predominantly represented in research that informs the priorities and growth of museums and heritage sites. Museum and Heritage Studies forms entire fields of research and exists to address how such sites are managed, designed and function (ideally) to promote the shared mission of preservation, education and exploration. That literature is rich with its own theories, and it is not the aim of this paper do much more than dip a toe in those waters, guided by some of the key voices shaping the discussion around cultural co-creation, non-representational research and the visitor experience. Here, the focus will remain firmly interdisciplinary and concerned with how we as academics might use methods borrowed from various disciplines to structure and conduct research that actively and meaningfully contributes to the process of cultural co-creation. The museum visitor experience forms a small, but representative example of the process.

II. WHAT DOES OUR RESEARCH VALUE?

To paraphrase Karl Kerényi, quant-creep into the social sciences is making us forget what is truly valuable in human experience while usurping the significant energy we devote to studying it. Even as it has emerged alongside the study of affect, non-representational research has been sidelined by an academic culture increasingly hypnotized by the quantifiable and dismissive of the unmeasurable. Precisely because non-representational research resists delivering representational results, these stories fall squarely in a category Michel Foucault termed “subjugated”. In other words, they have been deemed unserious, “inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated...”¹ and become unwanted children wandering between the fiercely defended spaces of the fine arts, criticism and theory.

With few exceptions, academic literature in the social sciences laying claim to authoritative and data-driven studies of the human experience tends to exclude such research or relegates it to theoretical spaces where its real-world influence is limited. We note a palpable shift in the way researchers qualify our human experiences as either consumers or co-creators of culture as a result. The trend to publishing research into the museum visitor experience has increased steadily from 2000 to the present, plainly illustrated by a quick search of Google Scholar for peer-reviewed journal articles including the search terms “museum+visitor+experience” (Figure 1). A quick gloss of the titles while researching this article revealed a preponderance of research focused on integrating technologies like “artificial intelligence” and studying technology-based learning platforms within the museum.

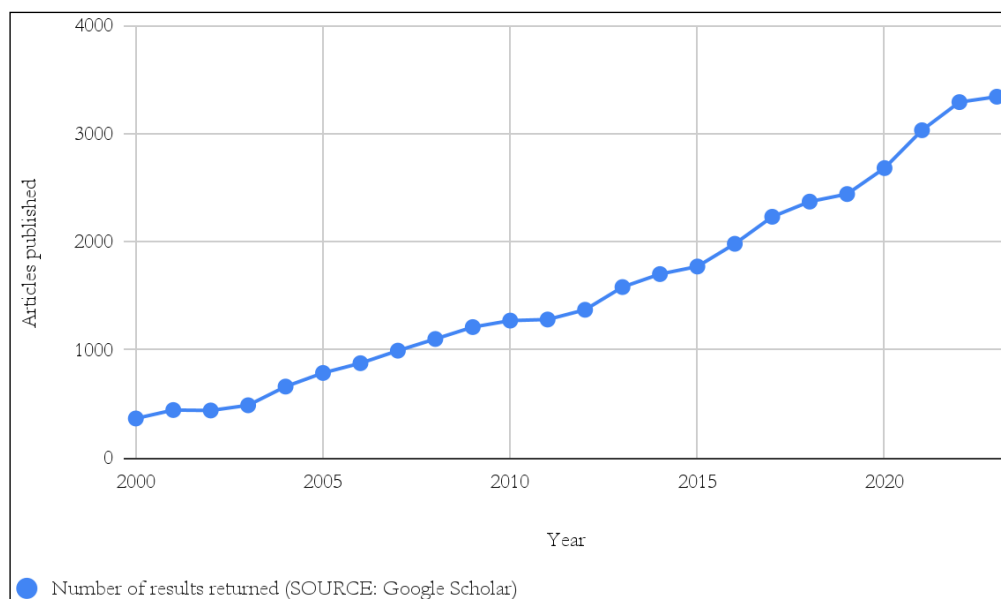


Figure 1 “Museum Visitor Experience” article search results.

Stepping back from the problem for a moment, what is the role of a museum? The definition provided by the International Council of Museums states that a museum: “is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets

1 Michel Foucault. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Vintage, 1980, 82.

and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”² The website of the IBSA foundation (an international foundation dedicated to promoting scientific culture) is more direct, possibly channeling a frazzled parent’s fanciful conception of what “time out” means for an unruly child: “[museums are] special spaces where we can understand and make sense of the world.”³ From these broad definitions, it follows that research on the visitor experience might reasonably be expected to valorize how the embodied visitor perceives the museum space, interacts with the objects contained therein, and assumes an active role in synthesizing those impressions in conversation with others. This synthesis describes the process I call cultural co-creation.

How might we examine the visitor’s experience of “making sense of the world” using a non-representational lens? What, exactly, are we looking for? In terms specific to this project, “non-representational” translates to consciously avoiding normative methods employed to measure the visitor’s experience as a *customer* experience, focusing instead on communicating the numinous (real yet imperceptible and unquantifiable) experience of cultural co-creation based on the experience of visiting a museum. Counting how many times an object is viewed, or how many visitors positively respond to being asked to take a survey about the quality of the displays puts their experience into isolation, stripping it of any value which is not comparable to another. Non-representational theory asks us to take a different path to making sense of the world. Nigel Thrift writes simply that the aim of such research is to “capture the ‘onflow’ ... of everyday life.”⁴ In this framing, the “onflow” Thrift describes is the felt experience of cultural co-creation.

This paper contends with the possibility that normative *methods* of measuring and researching human experiences as though they were consumer trends valorize aspects of the technologically mediated experience which run counter to the intended purpose of the museum. I attempt to engage non-representational theory to research the visitor experience in a way that articulates and values cultural co-creation over those quantifiable consumer behaviors while simultaneously telling a story that constructs culture and supports the mission of the museum.

Increasingly, it falls to interdisciplinary researchers to contend with an essential juxtaposition of *measurement* and *meaning*, the aim of which is not to discredit the value of the former, but rather to allow the possibility of the commensurate importance of the latter. As we will see in the discussion of the site of our study, the preponderance of research informing museum administration and state officials overwhelmingly privileges data and data-gathering technologies in a way that has profound implications for the way these professionals structure their work and engage with visitors.

III. RESEARCH POSTURES AND (UN)INTENTIONAL OUTCOMES

MEMORY-KEEPING AT HERITAGE SITES AND MUSEUMS

Memory-keeping is one expression of non-representational research into the lived human experience – the beating heart of cultural co-creation which has served a fundamental role in shaping society for time immemorial. In *Theatres of Memory*, British historian Raphael Samuel describes how “quantification creep” into the social sciences and early adoption of technologies of the datalogical turn worked to undermine the critical role of memory-keeping in academia: “Today history is no longer regarded as a branch of literature, if only because historians themselves harbour quite other ambitions, connecting their work with ‘theory’ or quantifying their findings in the manner of science ... Memory-keeping is a function increasingly assigned to the electronic media, while a new awareness of the artifice of representation casts a cloud of suspicion over the documentation of the past.”⁵ The work of memory-keeping, according to Samuel, “was a

2 International Council of Museums. “Museum Definition - International Council of Museums,” June 5, 2023. <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

3 IBSA Foundation for scientific research. “The Role of Museums Today, Yesterday and Tomorrow.” IBSA Foundation for Scientific Research (blog), n.d.

4 Nigel Thrift. *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. Routledge, 2008, 8.

5 Raphael Samuel. *Theatres of memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*. Verso Books. 2012, 48.

public activity in which almost everyone might find themselves involved, if only as witnesses or – in the case of the sermon exemplum – silent listeners.”⁶ The abdication of this role by academic historians and increasing popular reliance on socially atomizing digital platforms to record and share human experiences was a loss Samuel was unwilling to countenance, and his celebration of dynamic, democratic heritage sites and local museums reflects his concerns.

Samuel describes at length the co-creative efforts of local museums and heritage sites in glowing terms, emphasizing the dialectical engagement of community members and visitors in assuming the role of memory-keepers. Speaking to the reorganization of “core curriculum” in 1970s Britain, Samuel demonstrates the positive aspects of cultural co-creation and how it is accomplished through communal engagement in heritage-related activities. In each example he provides, groups of students engage with educators and each other to experience some aspect of common culture that contributes to their learning. Crucially, the success of these efforts also depends on trained and engaged staff Samuel describes as: “Drawing on personal experience and local knowledge, schooled or trained through the medium of oral history, and with their presentation enriched by a constant exchange with old-timers, they are at once pedagogically and histrionically effective, wearing period costume and handling historical objects with aplomb, and fielding visitors’ queries.”⁷ The employment and training of people to fulfil these crucial roles is directly threatened by the current rise of digitalization and so-called “interactive” digital platforms in these cultural spaces, a worrying trend to which we will return later in the specific context of the Salinas Museum.

Setting aside for a moment the intentional layers of nation-building, ideology and politics involved, a museum is a space that collects and displays objects of cultural significance. Understanding what those objects do in terms of inspiring and engaging visitors during their experience loops memory-keeping into the conversation of cultural co-creation. This special function of objects which readily inspire conversation about memory, history and the present is referred to as “object links”. In their exploration of the numinous in museums, Kiersten Latham describes the character of object links as “sparking the perceptions, thoughts, and/or feelings in [the] encounter, and act[ing] as evidence or a witness to the past. [They begin] the experience.”⁸ The experience of encountering the object link causes the visitor to project an arc of conversation from an obscure past into the distant future, situating themselves with peers in an ever-emerging present which is the ongoing act of cultural co-creation. Encountering an object link in the presence of a memory-keeper facilitates and enhances the co-creative experience.

The cultural entropy the datalogical turn enables in the museum or heritage site visit is exposed when one interrogates the methods with which human experiences are observed and assessed. When reduced to anonymous data points, the most common expression of a visitor experience more accurately describes the journey of a consumer in pursuit of an end goal (i.e. someone making a purchase) devaluing the contributions of an active participant in cultural co-creation. In her study of the shifting role of the museum, Anda Becuț Marinescu finds that, “museums are becoming cathedrals of consumption as defined by Ritzer, cultural malls as defined by Baudrillard, or ‘entertainment machines’, meant to satisfy rather the appetite for playing and consumption than the need for knowledge.”⁹ Marinescu clearly points to the possibility that what we choose to observe in our research and the systems we entrust with the task of memory-keeping in place of people might well be at the root of our increasing inability to assign value to experiences once held fundamental to the healthy growth of our culture.

As it concerns itself with the ideal role of the museum and heritage site, the work of Emma Waterton and Laura Jane Smith advocating for community engagement with archeology and the museum as sites of memory-keeping meaningfully informs my treatment of the active role of the visitor experience in creating culture. Their work with architectural heritage and the linkages established between professional researchers and the public is especially relevant to my work at the Salinas Museum, which was the first museum in Sicily to collect and display

6 Samuel, 2012, 47.

7 Samuel, 2012, 175.

8 Kiersten F. Latham. “Numinous Experiences With Museum Objects.” *Visitor Studies* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 2013), 13.

9 Anda Becuț Marinescu. “The Museum Between Education and Entertainment: The Role of the Museum According to the Target Public.” *Sociology International Journal* 2, no. 3 (May 25, 2018), 185.

objects specifically connected to archeological heritage. Waterton and Smith explain the evolving role of such museums as being firmly rooted in education: “Museums also have a central and defining role as educators, and concerns with how museums educate, and how visitors learn, during the museum visit dominate much of this literature.”¹⁰

NON-REPRESENTATIONAL VALUES

The museum is not simply a warehouse for antique objects. It is also a site for groups of people to form narratives about history and its role in shaping the present in an intentional, specifically designed space. To the extent that the museum is created by administrators, it is also made by visitors. Waterton and Smith write: “Museum research has revealed that museum visitors are active agents in the way that they engage with museum exhibitions”¹¹ referencing research by Bagnall and Longhurst. The ways in which data collection technologies have been deployed in the museum context to quantify and shape the visitor experience provides an uncomplicated illustration of the datalogical turn at work and simultaneously presents a fertile field for test-driving non-representational research models. The goal is to provide an example of how we might differently conceive of and conduct research to form a productive part of a culturally co-creative conversation.

Why is this exercise in the application of unfamiliar, even occulted methods urgently necessary? Looking beyond the museum and the role of memory-keeping in cultural co-creation, we find the negative blowback of the superposition of data analysis over felt human experience manifest everywhere in contemporary Western societies. From the chronic underfunding and disciplinary shuffling of humanities departments at our research universities to the tenor of discourse accepted in politics and civil society best characterized by the absurd concept of “post-truth”. Endoxa (opinions generally accepted to be correct within a specific cultural idiom) is manufactured, amplified and propagated by algorithmically determined repetition rather than human engagement with a shared narrative. This act of fabrication naturally privileges data as authoritative, a positioning specifically designed to shut down conversation with the weight of numbers. The result is social atomization, the erosion of shared culture and norms in favor of what might be termed ontological individualism. When we devalue shared experience, we lose the crucial ability to have meaningful conversations with each other, conversations that narrate and create our common culture. Non-representational research aims to restore the value of conversational exchange to our findings, encouraging us to emerge from digital isolation and reinvigorate the narrative of cultural co-creation.

How might a non-representational approach to conducting research in the humanities contribute to a more nuanced understanding of human experience and work to realign our conversations to value the less-tangible artifacts of human progress over quantified expressions? Conducting and presenting research that aims to create conversations rather than establish an authoritative, but essentially meaningless mastery of position based on data is inherently interdisciplinary, so it is unsurprising that champions of interdisciplinarity such as James Chandler, Clifford Geertz, Adrian Johns, Arnold Davidson¹² have set out to critically challenge the datalogical turn in research and highlight the urgency of conceptualizing alternative research methodologies. Clough et al. pinpoint the source of the trend as a “performative coming out of an unconscious drive that has long haunted sociology and is now animating an emerging conception of sociality for which bodies, selves, contexts or environments are being reconfigured in relationship to politics or economy.”¹³ Further, David Shumway contends that: “Neoliberalism and the accompanying but separate phenomenon of financialization have made it harder to understand the value of non-applied research in any field.”¹⁴

10 Smith, L., & Waterton, E. *Heritage, Communities and Archaeology*. Bristol Classical Press. 2009, 105.

11 Smith & Waterton, 2009, 108.

12 See: James Chandler, “Introduction: Doctrines, Disciplines, Discourses, Departments.” *Critical inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 729–46.

13 Patricia Ticineto Clough, Karen Gregory, Benjamin Haber, and R. Joshua Scannell. “The Datalogical Turn” in *Non-representational Methodologies: Re-envisioning Research*, Phillip Vannini ed., 2015, 147.

14 David Shumway. “The University, Neoliberalism, and the Humanities: A History.” *Humanities* 6, no. 4 2017, 83.

As discussed above, reliance on digital technology to do the important work of studying the museum visitor experience has given rise to a burgeoning research literature that distorts the intended role of the museum. The momentum of this trend forces the museum to rededicate itself to commerce by measuring its success with metrics designed to track consumer behavior. A visitor experience study conducted by Najda-Janoszka & Sawczuk claims: “The inability to fully translate physical activities and spaces into a digital format [...] has been largely mitigated by strengthening digitally enhanced dialogue with stakeholders, such as through increased presence on social media platforms.”¹⁵ Contrast this peer-reviewed study with Joshua Samuels, who instead values the museum as a space for cultural co-creation: “these spaces are most usefully understood as generating new kinds of meaning, rather than foreclosing them.”¹⁶ In other words, the experience of a visitor is de facto generative, while the technologies associated with mediating and measuring those experiences are not.

Racing deeper into the transhuman bog, AI boosterism shamelessly encouraged in academia accelerates the mania for mediating human experience in the museum space by imagining a role for natural language processing systems like ChatGPT. A recent study by Mohamad Fareed, for example, proposes myriad ways this ecologically catastrophic¹⁷ technology could be deployed to further violate intellectual property rights and replace professionals who have devoted their lives to interpreting the cultural wealth of museums. According to Fareed, AI’s role in the museum could: “encompass tasks such as responding to visitor queries, offering tailored recommendations, and facilitating constructive dialogues between visitors and museum personnel.”¹⁸ Reading this boosterism masquerading as science we effectively arrive at the dismal conclusion that computers and data might eventually do the work of creating culture all on their own. All we humans will need to do is walk down a hall and buy something every now and then to keep the cash flowing.

The prominent role of customer-facing digital technologies in the museum has existed for decades, closely adhering to research trends performed in the service industries. Indeed, identifying the museum visitor as a consumer problematizes the core mission of a museum, regardless of the form any technological “innovation” may take – and museum administrators know this. Tsyganova and Krichever write, “museums assume that this transformation will not only ruin the classical understanding of the museums but also make the institutions a form of mass-entertainment.”¹⁹ We return again to the critique of Raphael Samuel, who lamented the way academic historians have abdicated the role of memory-keeper to electronics.

Measuring and recording visitor responses to mediated aspects of an experience (i.e. representational data gathered for consumer trend tracking and associated regression analyses) creates the illusion that such technologies are permanently situated inevitabilities. Across the board, these technologies are being employed to simulate experience, with the residual data secreted by the simulation spawning further research that in turn champions simulation as a viable alternative to reality. If the trend continues, future researchers in the social sciences may discover that humans inhabit a disconnected and depopulated simulacrum without any culture left to study at all.

THE ITALIAN OPPORTUNITY

Italy’s state-run museums provide a unique opportunity to examine the problem of the datalogical turn, its effect on cultural co-creation and the reasons for its ubiquity. Coinciding

15 Marta Najda-Janoszka and Magdalena Sawczuk. “Exploring the Barriers of Multi-stakeholder Value Co-creation – the Museum Context.” *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 36, no. 4 (July 22, 2023), 612.

16 Joshua Samuels. “Of Other Scapes: Archaeology, Landscape, and Heterotopia in Fascist Sicily.” *Archaeologies* 6, no. 1 (March 3, 2010), 68.

17 See: Kerry Day. “Calculating the True Environmental Costs of AI.” *Advanced Science News*, January 13, 2025. “collectively, the top 20 AI systems they included in their study consumed enough energy to rival a small country, like Iceland or Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as examples. In fact, in 2022, the carbon emissions from these AI systems surpassed the emissions emitted by 137 individual countries.”

18 Mohamed W. Fareed. “Introducing ChatGPT to Education in Science Museums: A Conceptual Framework.” *Journal of Museum Education*, February 5, 2025, 1.

19 Lubov A. Tsyganova and Evgeniia Krichever. “The Influence of Digitization on the Transformation of the Heritage Institutions.” *Directory of Open Access Journals*, July 1, 2022, 26.

with tourism numbers, attendance at Italy's 4,976 state-operated museums and heritage sites has trended steadily upwards over the past decade.²⁰ At the same time, Catherine Bennett reports that staffing shortages have plagued the system due to a peculiarity of the Italian civil service hiring plan "in which hundreds of people sit national civil service exams for the generic position of art official, after which they are distributed to cultural sites around the country, without their specialisations being taken into account."²¹ Her reporting echoes Samuel's description of the engaging staff who enlivened smaller heritage sites all over Britain in the wake of the core curriculum reforms, Bennet's observation shows how difficult this can be to maintain when the human resource system further degrades the role of memory-keepers.

Local administrators have adequate budget to spend on staff but cannot always hire persons knowledgeable in the appropriate subject areas. As an anecdotal example, imagine a woman who has studied and published on Renaissance art in Medici-era Florence and, after passing the civil service exam, is subsequently posted to a Greek-era heritage site in Sicily instead of the Uffizi. The visitor experience would suffer from the absence of her informed insights on the one hand, and her relative ignorance or disinterest on the other. Hamstrung administrators instead spend their state-allotted budgets on mediating technologies – purchases justified by academic studies of the visitor experience derived from and thereby promoting those same technologies. The administrator can demonstrate increased engagement in the form of easily quantified views of digitized collections and other technologically mediated "solutions". Meanwhile, our hypothetical expert might be tempted to turn down the state option and take a job in the private sector, lending her hard-earned credentials to producing more of the same mediated content that obviates her role and the roles of others like her in engaging with cultural co-creation as memory-keepers.

Administrators must increasingly contend with what amounts to a crisis of identity when considering the role their museums play: do they exist to guide tourists to a measurable, transactional end goal or do they facilitate an interrogative and productive experience in real space that anticipates an evolving future for that culture? Snowballing research literature focused on consumer analytics absorbs vast troves of data generated by on-site digital technologies and injects it back into the system as a surrogate for the actual visitor experience, minimizing the importance of cultural co-creation and accelerating a focus on what might better be described as a consumer experience.

One final note must be made on the reasons for selecting the Salinas Museum as the site of this study. A key reason attends to the specific history of Sicily and the way the conversations of cultural co-creation can occur free of the historical stain of colonialism, theft and appropriation. This pride of place and uncomplicated sense of intimate connection with the people of the past was noted repeatedly by participants in my study detailed in the concluding discussion below. Over nearly 3 millennia of civilization, the populations of the island neither violently displaced an indigenous culture nor attempted to colonize another land. The Sicily of today reflects a uniquely Mediterranean palimpsest holding itself at arms-length from the continental "European" whole to which it nevertheless belongs. It is rare (if not unique) to discover a Western museum displaying the archeological heritage of four distinct cultures spanning thousands of years of history (Native Sicilian, Phoenician, Greek and Roman in the case of the Salinas Museum) which has not participated in the theft or appropriation of indigenous artifacts in some way. The process of cultural co-creation and the conversations that enable it are often fraught, and for good reason. It is no small thing to have the opportunity to study this fascinating process among a population whose sense of belonging is a source of pride that does not necessitate elaborate apologies or convoluted excuses for inconvenient history.

AFFECT AND SPACE IN CONVERSATION

Understanding and communicating the value of non-representational research is a vital step in accepting that the responsibility of creating culture is shared through participation in cultural activities. Jacque Micieli-Voutsinas and Angela Person collect the work of researchers engaging affect and non-representational theory to study heritage and museum sites in their volume *Affective Architectures*. Micieli-Voutsinas explains the profound recalibration such an approach can have on our research: "affective heritage redirects public learning at places of memory

20 Statistics sourced from public reports: "Statistiche Culturali – Anno 2023," n.d.

21 Catherine Bennett. "The HR Crisis Hobbles Italian Museums" *Apollo Magazine*, February 9, 2024.

towards embodied, emotional learning.”²² Conveying value in terms of embodied research refutes reliance on quantifiable data and re-values cultural co-creation without trading on the inherent positionality of the generative act of knowledge creation, but raises certain other problems connected with the subjectivity of affect.

In the same volume, Peng Liu explores the affective geography of the Forbidden City, delivering a record of embodied exploration of the ancient space and their physical place within heritage spaces which is both meaningfully present and historical. Liu writes: “My body is acted upon by multiple institutions that determine the heritage experience in the space.”²³ The apparently uncomplicated experience of visiting a museum or heritage site here provides a rich example of embodied research on affective spaces. The record and sense memory of “certain bodily sensations” become a key to decode Peng’s experience, a record pregnant with signification of the past in conversation with the present. The below quote describes the vibrancy of Liu’s subjectivity and how their socialized body was affected by walking in the space of the Forbidden City:

“Confucianism, the national ideology regulating the Imperial society for centuries, is inherited from my Chinese ancestors and deeply rooted in my body, and it guides my body in the space through cultural expectation—so much so that I see myself as a body forged from traditional, Imperial, and oriental philosophies. However, as I was born in and grew up during the New China period, my body is also imbued with a strong revolutionary sense—a New China-era body of modern, patriotic, and socialist values. This is a profound cultural change that, in effect, sets up two ideological systems for comprehending the world in parallel, or at times paradoxical, terms. Moreover, after almost two decades of living in Australia, I have developed an enhanced understanding of cross-cultural and multi-cultural values which, in turn, further sensitizes my body to cultural multiplicity. Therefore, when I return to this heritage space after first visiting, I find that my own rather complex subjectivity determines my bodily movement in the space and that the space exerts a specific impact on my body. My own bodily experience of wandering/walking in the living area of this space with almost countless courtyards demonstrates the affective encounter between my sociological body and the heritage space.”²⁴

Sensing affect in an environment is entirely bounded by individual perception, as they point out above. Liu’s unique positionality creates a research record that can meaningfully enter into conversation (become co-creative of culture) on the condition that it is shared, but their valuable research can be easily overpowered by the vast preponderance of visitors who are not Peng Liu. In this case, the work of cultural co-creation is only half-complete because it fails to enter into conversation with similarly conducted research at the same site. How might we acculturate Liu’s research, valuing it as a part of a larger conversation of cultural co-creation and what methods would we require to do so?

ENGAGING THE GROUP DÉRIVE

Like many of the theories that have beguiled and inspired researchers in the social sciences over the past 50 years or more (I think of Lefebvre’s Rhythmanalysis and Debord’s Psychogeography), non-representational theory is light in terms of how it ought to be applied in practice. Walking has emerged as a common method for researchers seeking an embodied way to explore affective environments. Liu, for example, writes: “I use my body walking in the Forbidden City as a research method. Walking, as an embodied act has been theorized as a method for understanding the world and is recognized as an embodied way of knowing.”²⁵ Tim Ingold demonstrates the anthropological interrelation of walking in his essay “Culture on the Ground”, marvelously articulating the most basic observation that: “it is surely through our feet, in contact with the ground (albeit mediated by footwear), that we are most fundamentally and continually ‘in touch’

22 Micieli-Voutsinas, J., & Person, A. M.. *Affective architectures: More-Than-Representational Geographies of Heritage*. Routledge. 2021, 2.

23 Liu, Peng “Body in the Forbidden City: Embodied sensibilities and lived experience in the affective architecture.” in *Affective architectures: More-Than-Representational Geographies of Heritage*. Eds. Micieli-Voutsinas, J., & Person, A. M. Routledge. 2021, 120–139.

24 Peng, 2021, 123.

25 Peng, 2021, 125.

with our surroundings.”²⁶ Walking has also proven to be a contemplative and simple method with which to explore the creation of space (Nash 2018; Massey 2005) and the emotional geography of the built world (Smith 2010; Careri 2017; Crespi 2020), but in order to interrogate the communal process of cultural co-creation a group ought to engage in the research together.

The *dérive* formed the core practice of psychogeography as conceived by Guy Debord and the Situationists. Born as a ludic but critical method of exploring linkages between the built culture of the consumerist anthropocene and the emotional ambience of cities, it remains an ideal methodology to employ when researching a communal process of making space. In the Situationist imagination the *dérive* – essentially an aimless walk at the heart of reading psychogeography – gave rise to the creation of “situations” intended to provoke, sense, interpret and react to the ambient presence of cultural imprints on the geography of a city. In his tantalizing description, Guy Debord wrote, “...cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones,”²⁷ but the practice was by no means limited to cities. Over time, repeated excursions to the same contained space reveal a depth of emotional and socially constructed contours that is equally rewarding: “at its minimum it can be limited to a small self-contained ambience ... the extreme case being a static-*dérive* of an entire day within the Saint-Lazare train station.”²⁸ The *dérive* thus presents itself as a method partially suited to the dense tangle of influences, histories and narratives informing cultural co-creation during a museum visit.

Phil Smith, one of the most prolific and innovative adherents of psychogeography (which he has evolved into a bespoke practice he calls “mythogeography”) described the Situationist model of the *dérive* as being outdated and “Inadequate as a dynamic model...”²⁹ He cautions that the gathering of results requires a communally diverse and distinctly non-representational approach that Debord and the original practitioners would likely have condemned as counter-revolutionary due to its unfrontational positioning: “Where the *dérive* continues to be practised as a collective act, documentation is often anonymous, freely distributed, gifts rather than commodities, and participation is gender-balanced, where solo walking is mostly male.”³⁰ Smith’s sympathetic rehabilitation of the *dérive* provides us with guidelines for generating non-representational research that are less political and intentionally activist, while aspiring to inclusivity in practice. Within the group *dérive* we arrive at research findings which are rigorous and mutually engaging without being elitist or exclusive. Smith continues in this vein, “the contemporary *dérive* will do best when it resists the drift towards reconciliation or antagonism; when it defers such syntheses in favour of dispersal and diffusion.”³¹ The embodied group *dérive* valorizes the visitor experience as communally constructed while simultaneously bound to the affect of place and space in a mode impossible to simulate or quantify with digital technologies.

Smith also notes the way a group engaged in a *dérive* elicits an almost conspiratorial camaraderie even from agents of authority. He explains, “The dispersed authority of the *dérive*, a tactical passivity, is often reciprocated by concierges, guards and owners anxious to tell their secrets and display their goods.”³² In the context of researching the museum visit experience, this curious phenomenon proves an incredible boon to maintaining the focus on the shared experience and unprompted conversation, facilitated by memory-keepers.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In order to capture the “onflow” (the term Nigel Thrift used to describe the aim of non-representational research) of the museum visit experience and whether or not specific aspects of it sparked cultural co-creation I conducted and recorded a series of two group *dérives* through

26 Tim Ingold. “Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet.” *Journal of Material Culture* (London) 9, no. 3, 2004, 315–40.

27 Guy Debord. “Theory of the *Dérive*” in *Situationist International Anthology*. Ken Knabb, ed. PM Press, 2024, 63.

28 Debord, 2024, 65.

29 Phil Smith “The contemporary *dérive*: a partial review of issues concerning the contemporary practice of psychogeography”. *Cultural Geographies* 17(1). 2010, 111.

30 Smith, 2012, 111.

31 Smith, 2012, 112.

32 Smith, 2012, 113.

the Salinas Museum in Palermo, Sicily. During the *dérives*, I focused on three key aspects of the experience: (1) unprompted conversation inspired by object links or intentionally constructed spaces in the museum, especially affective moments when visitors described emotions related to the experience and (2) the groups' tendency to incorporate elements of those discussions into an unrelated conversation following the visit. Finally, (3) I conducted a narrative analysis of the conversation, teasing out moments where the participants engaged rhetorical elements to form agreement around shared narratives. The narrative findings (I call them *dérive* narratives)³³ take the form of a series of brief essays centered thematically around object links, affective spaces and the conversations that grew around them as we moved through the museum. Each is followed by quotes from the participants. These elements form a conversational drift, an affective record of the evolving conversation guided by the participants' embracing their own role as memory-keepers and active participants in cultural co-creation.

Each group *dérive* was composed of four people: three visitors shadowed by myself (the researcher). The participants were selected at random from a pool of people in the square outside the museum, each of whom indicated that they intended to visit based on a scripted, in-person request. In return for their participation, I purchased their tickets to enter the museum and provided coffee and snacks for the post-visit discussion. I focused special attention on the connections between physical movements through the space and engagement in conversation around objects and spaces, noting moments when group members were triggered to share their subjective experiences connected with the objects and spaces of the museum.

At the beginning of the visit, each member of the group was provided with brief guidelines explaining the purpose of the visit and directing them to discuss their experience with each other aloud as they proceeded through the space (see **Appendix 1**). Before beginning the visit, they were also provided with a brief questionnaire containing five questions about topics not directly related to the museum (see **Appendix 2**). The questions were designed to provoke thinking about current social and cultural topics unrelated to the museum contents and we returned to those questions for the post-visit discussion. Once the questionnaires were completed, the *dérive* began.

During the visit I remained absolutely silent. The path of each *dérive* was determined organically by the group. Decisions to move between displays, enter a new room or engage with interactive displays were unprompted. I recorded the visits using a simple voice recorder and a notebook. Each visit was limited to one hour but could be ended at any time before the hour was up based on group consensus. Immediately following the visit, the group moved to a quiet place and was prompted to discuss their initial answers to the questionnaire with each other. That conversation was also recorded.³⁴ After the *dérives*, the recordings were transcribed and translated from Italian and the specific objects and spaces identified by the members in their narratives were photographed to provide data richness (see **Appendix 3**). A map of the paths taken by each group through the museum was also compiled by the researcher (see **Appendix 4**).

V. RESULTS

GROUP DETAILS

Group 1 Participants:

1. (Retired, Male, 64, Italian/Sicilian, Italian)
2. (Quality Control Manager, Female, 64, Italian/Venetian, Italian)
3. (Marketing Professional, Female, 31, Italian/Sicilian, Italian)

Total visit time: 01:06:10

³³ The *dérive* narrative is centered thematically around object links, affective spaces and the conversations that grew around them. Narrative form is provided by the researcher and indicated in plain text. Quotations from group members are italicized and identified with their group number and the line corresponding to the transcript in parenthesis.

³⁴ In consideration of space constraints, complete transcripts of the conversations were not included for publication but will be made available by the author upon request.

1. (Student, Female, 26, Italian/Sicilian, Italian)
2. (Interior Designer, Male, 57, Italian/Sicilian, Italian)
3. (Art History Professor, Female, 54, Italian/Sicilian, Italian)

Total visit time: 00:45:02

DÉRIVE NARRATIVES

1. Land And Freedom

Formerly the property of the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri, an order of un-ordained priests who sought to live as monastics without the bother of taking religious vows, the Salinas museum retains echoes of the sacred. This is evidenced by the way the space naturally directs the visitor's gaze upwards; the museum itself forms a bridge between past and future as the oratory sought to connect what is below and what is above. The building was designed to be a space for peaceful contemplation, a carefully curated oasis in the center of the chaotic city. We enter through a gift shop into the first of two central courtyards containing a fountain with turtles sunning themselves. Descending a short flight of stairs into the second courtyard we discover neatly tended gardens scattered with the shattered remains of ancient columns and flanked by ornately carved sarcophagi. Natural light streams into the display halls, filtering through mature trees and reflecting from cool fountains. The group pauses, lacking any directional indicators and overwhelmed by the harmonious juxtaposition of ruins and nature. They slowly contend with belonging to the place and what that sensibility has to offer.

"It's beautiful, with all the objects... There are no words. We literally wander inside a city that no longer exists, but at the same time is still there, so present... and obviously, as you walk, you have the sensation of time standing still..." (Group 1, lines 142–144)

"Sicily has remained a unique land, where the more we travel the more we realize we lack nothing." (Group 2, post-visit lines 134–136)

"We also have a piece of land in the country called Palisi. Every time I go there, for me, it's truly a return, in some way, immersed in a bucolic landscape... it's extraordinary." (Group 1, post-visit lines 47–50)

"This was designed to always feel like an open-air museum, hence the glass windows overlooking the garden." (Group 2, lines 6–7)

"In Alia there is this stretch of road that goes to the Lufa caves... it's a kind of an enchanted journey." (Group 1, post-visit lines 43–46)

"Sicily has always experienced presence, culture from one domination to another, from one era to another, it's there... it's a privilege that many don't understand, the land is what we know it to be. Today, our land is a treasure chest!" (Group 1, lines 270–274)

"I still belong to this history. I'm a daughter of all this, we all are, because we were born in this land..." (Group 1, lines 267–269)

2. Isolated/Occulted

Each is drawn to a different path but passes over the same threshold in setting out. There is value in the small, the hidden, the obscure that is negotiated by the *dérive*. One group shoots off to the arcade of statuary on their left while the other, after a moment of reverie in the garden, is drawn to a hidden room to the right of the stairs leading down to the second courtyard. Nearly invisible before the grandeur of the second courtyard, the small room houses some of the museum's most fascinating misfits. The Palermo Stone, an eerie black tablet carved with hieroglyphs and prized alongside the famed Rosetta Stone as a key to deciphering the language and customs of ancient Egypt. The Cefalu heart scarab is here too, a totemic guide through the afterlife inscribed to a chantress of the cult of Bastet, discovered by a teenager after a mudslide on the mountain above the town of Cefalu. Despite the eclectic diversity these objects inject into Sicilian cultural identity they don't fit neatly into the grand imperial narratives populating the rest of the museum: relatively quotidian relics of the Phoenician, Greek and Roman ages that adhere desperately to a sense of semi-manufactured historical relevance.

A line from Manlio Sgalambro's introduction to *Il Cavaliere dell'intelletto* springs to mind: "Solo nel momento felice dell'arte quest'isola è vera."³⁵ In the room one has the subtle sensation of being physically squeezed, compressed into a chaotic historical mass that is largely unrelieved by the densely academic explanations offered by the accompanying texts. Some energy wants to escape, while an equal part seeks to remain.

"Crossing the strait marks a specific moment when I return to Sicily. After having been away, I return home. I don't know, I like it. This slowness, this unique moment of arriving in our land." (Group 2, post-visit lines 127–131)

"(The Palermo Stone's) importance is not only historical, but also symbolic. It is a unique testimony that allows us to reconstruct languages, cultures and systems of thought from the past." (Group 1, lines 40–42)

"I read somewhere that the Palermo Stone is the most important after the Rosetta Stone and there are 5 others. I think they're in London?"

"Maybe at the National Gallery?"

"Still, it's shocking that no one seems to know about the Palermo Stone. It seems like 'outside of us.'"

"No one pays it any attention." (Group 2, lines 240–249)

"It's an uncomfortable situation, there are too many gaps." (Group 1, lines 16–18)

"But knowledge is like that. It is a constant evolution. We'll always be missing that one particular piece." (Group 1, lines 16–18)

"I'm interested in the idea of seamless connection between the mainland and the island." (Group 1, post-visit lines 32–34)

"We need to be able to understand and evaluate which of the evils is lesser." (Group 1, post-visit line 140)

3. Memory-keepers

A labyrinth of halls and galleries reveals itself as the groups wind their way through the museum like pilgrims circumnavigating a Hindu temple. Confusion about the chronological presentation of artifacts rises in comments, but the groups immerse themselves in discussions triggered especially by quotidian objects from antiquity. We seem to be the only people in the museum, which is a welcome development that allows the *dérive* to progress without obstruction and the conversation to ebb and flow without fear of spoiling the tranquility of others. We stand in awe before the famous Stagnone statue, beautifully illuminated in an alcove off the central courtyard. Discovered and dredged from the sea by a fisherman in 1933, the surface of the statue (also known as the "Youth of Mozia") is pockmarked by centuries of submersion but remains subtle and expressive. Members of both groups comment on the suggestive lighting and how it details the projection of refined masculine beauty of the carving. Finally we enter the room devoted to the metopes of Selinunte, gorgeous statuary removed from the largest temples in Magna Grecia to preserve them, so one is informed, from the ravages of time. No mention is made of how they managed to remain unravaged for 2 millennia, but such was the remit of memory-keepers at the turn of the 20th century. The massive carvings bring to life scenes from Ovid and Hesiod – the cosmology and theophany of the ancients captured in stone and once suspended 20 meters above the heads of citizens as they passed from the Selinunte port up to their patrician homes in the city. Here today we discover crowds of museum staff, huddled together in the heated space watching videos on their social media feeds, vaping and chatting among themselves. In one case they physically block our group's entry into the hall. At one corner of the room four comfortable chairs are arranged on a small stage near pedestals with sets of VR goggles attached to them. The museum staff sprawl on the chairs chatting, but grudgingly shuffle off as our group approaches to try the goggles. The system is offline and they see nothing but the irrelevant garble of computer code.

"Can you see the temple here in virtual reality?"

"Yes, but I think you need one of them (attendants) to activate it. Who knows." (Group 2, lines 149–150)

35 "Only in the happy moment of art is this island real." Sgalambro, Manlio, 1994.

"We live in a hyper-connected world, but who knows what we will leave behind in the end." (Group 2, line 22)

"We need to understand the historical background better, in my opinion."

"That's true – the itinerary isn't very good. Sometimes I don't even understand what era we are looking at." (Group 2, lines 178–180)

"Yeah, we went from the ancient, archaic era, like the Stagnone statue, then moved to the Roman and Greek eras, then find ourselves back in archaic Agrigento, Tindari, Centuripe... For anyone who doesn't have a clear picture of our history it could be a problem."

"The various rooms aren't well-marked at the doors." (Group 2, lines 181–188)

"My kids at school don't realize the dimensions. They look at pictures in books or online, but they don't realize how wide a column can be, the dimensions of a metope..." (Group 2, lines 64–66)

"Perhaps there are more custodians here than artifacts?" (Group 1, lines 236–240)

"Ten people in a room doing nothing."

"It's shameful, really. It saddens me because I'm passionate about history and it would be an honor for me to be here in their place." (Group 1, lines 236–240)

"These days we definitely find ourselves surrounded by cultural decadence." (Group 1, post-visit line 59)

"I say you need your voice to get through clearly to people if you're talking about history. You are a medium." (Group 2, line 86)

"...especially if you don't have a passion for introspection, looking into and understanding things... then you arrive at people like these who just sit around indifferently because they have no idea what beauty means." (Group 1, lines 274–276)

4. A critique of everyday objects

Display cases packed with thousands of numbered objects line the walls of the rear galleries of the museum. The spaces are tighter here, but unlike the dimly lit room housing the Palermo Stone the display lighting is bright and adds a few uncomfortable degrees to the air. We pass by the displays at a leisurely pace – the group dynamic of each *dérive* begins to coalesce around this meandering speed, granting each member ample time to observe, ponder and contribute. The groups take time to parse their own narratives triggered by the objects, especially the ways that they hint at habits and uses, networks of social interrelation and hierarchies that we can only reconstruct by piecing together meager remains. Around the cases the sense of broad historical time focused on the rise and fall of empires dissolves in favor of more personal conception of time associated with rituals like weddings, worship, professional life and burials – this ritual time is a cyclical construct into which one can enter and emerge at will, sparking the imagination and comparisons with the present. Partly due to the difficulty of connecting the explanatory texts to the numbered objects, partly due to the increasingly confused chronological organization of the rooms, more connections are drawn to present day. It seems as though the museum planners waffled here between representing finds based on geographical location and organizing them by historical time periods when planning the displays. Thus unguided, the group discussions take refuge in and refocus on the granular, the speculative, the personal. Who would give a gift like this? What were these women's lives like if their society represented them in this way? How does our material culture respond to this testimony of the past? Faced with these smaller object links rather than the awesome scale and workmanship of the metopes or statuary, the groups begin to wander more and become contemplative.

"It's a piggy bank! They put something inside, just like today?" (Group 1, lines 339–341)

"This helmet strikes me. Here was a human being who thought, acted, reacted..."

"True, but who knows under what specific circumstances." (Group 1, lines 33–34)

"In the classical age, the role of women was actually very privileged." (Group 1, lines 311–312)

"We saw hundreds of votive offerings, so certainly the power of women and the divine feminine was at least equal to that of men." (Group 1, lines 315–317)

"I visited the museum in Himera once and used an image from a coin we found there to create our company logo. The coin dated back to 280 BC and depicted a shepherd, pastures and a cow. It represented the wealth of the land..." (Group 2, lines 90–91)

"Look at its shape. It's identical to those produced today." (Group 2, line 44)

"I'm curious about the ones in figure 5. I don't quite understand what they are and I don't see number 5 here."

"Are these rings?"

"Gold rings! But for such tiny fingers! For a child, perhaps?" (Group 1, lines 122–128)

"When I travel, I'm interested in habits, in everyday life." (Group 2, post-visit line 102)

"Talking about peculiar fish, animals, habits and behaviors of the people of that time, about everyday life – those things leave you speechless, make you think."

"I'm always reevaluating, I hope, thanks to your perspective. For me, history from this point of view is objectively important, the idea that it is creativity, or imagination up to a certain point, it's absolutely pertinent." (Group 2, lines 95–101)

"Perhaps, proportionally there was just more attention paid back then than there is today. Now we think about other things. People get married and make a list of objects they want to receive. It's so obvious... devoid of sense and ritual." (Group 1, lines 150–155)

"We haven't invented anything at all. You only have to study 10% of history to understand that we haven't created anything new. We simply try to understand how to maintain or improve what history has already given us." (Group 1, lines 230–232)

"There was a saying I read recently – those who don't know the past are lost in their present in some way. What's more, they will never have an idea of the future beyond themselves." (Group 1, lines 380–382)

VI. DISCUSSION

I anticipated that the conversations around unrelated social and cultural topics following the museum visit would incorporate (explicitly or otherwise) elements of the conversations that occurred during the visit. I also expected to note discussions referencing local traditions and regional history as well as direct comparisons to the historical groups. I noted a gentle shift of conversation as individual group members' responses aligned with the observations of the others based on the shared experience of the *dérive*. The presence of these elements indicates that the members of the group were primed and engaged in cultural co-creation as a result of the museum visit experience.

The results of conducting the small group *dérives* surpassed expectations in a few important ways. First and foremost, the quality of conversation and depth of knowledge displayed by six random strangers with nothing more in common than that they planned to visit a museum on the same day was nothing short of breathtaking. This realization, arising as it did from conversation between people from a diverse range of backgrounds, confirms my hypothesis that culture is constructed together in conversation and that every voice is important "data". The way the conversations developed around specific object links (the wedding jars, the votive statues, the metopes and the Palermo Stone) stood out from the other discussions in terms of the breadth of detail and interpretive connections made with subjective experiences. In particular, the way the objects triggered memories of home and inspired a pride of place was notable. Discussions sparked by the sarcophagi, funerary urns and wedding vases directly connected the past with the present and each evolved into direct comparisons with objects still in use today, indicating that the context of history was being absorbed and processed as the visitors took on the role of memory-keepers.

Comments about the way the museum staff lingered together in the most comfortable rooms, blocking the path for visitors was also noted in a negative way, generating a discussion about present-day problems with state-run institutions and the abdication of the role of memory-keeper. Brief discussions about the lack of apparent planning and guidance through the museum were present in both groups, although **group 2** spent quite a bit more time analyzing this aspect of their experience afterwards and **group 1** devoted more energy to calling it out during their visit.

The final discussions both saw “tonal leakage” from the conversations that occurred during the museum visit. Notable among these were the palpable sense of pride of place, often tinged with nostalgia, that drifted from the imaginative voyage into the past into the discussions about the Messina strait bridge project and what people enjoyed doing in their free time. Both groups emphasized the unique nature of Sicilian culture in connection with its relative geographical isolation and commented on how fortunate they were to live in a place where such a deep cultural heritage is so readily accessible. Both groups also commented on perceptions of beauty and the changes in the performance of gendered roles, triggered by the Metope sculptures. Overwhelmed by the tranquility of the garden courtyards at the entry to the museum, “slow time” untroubled by the chaos of the outside world was indicated as a valuable aspect of the visitor experience and of their lives in general. The theme of cultural decadence also echoed through the visit and the discussion, especially with **group 1**, among whom the comments made about the museum staff seemed to sour the mood and introduce a sense of urgency to understanding and interpreting the history presented at the museum.

Group 2 took note of the television displays and VR goggles in the museum while **group 1** did not take notice of them, but instead noted the absence of other mediating aids like audio guides or QR codes. One member of **group 2** did attempt to try the devices, became confused and immediately abandoned the attempt. The presence of the goggles in the Metope room was noted negatively, as the group concurred that it was the most affecting and important room in the museum.

The paths taken through the museum and the time spent differed significantly between each group. **Group 1** spent the full hour wandering the museum but drifted apart more frequently to contemplate different objects before returning together. **Group 2** did not converse as easily as the first and moved more quickly through the space, but their observations tended to be more focused on internalizing and relating the experience of the visit to their personal experiences. Their discussion during the visit tended to be more focused on interpretation of the objects and the space, which differed from the physically descriptive, aesthetic observations that predominated in **group 1**. In fact, both **group 1** and **group 2** identified the central garden in conversation, identifying it as being a favorite space within the museum.

Based on this brief analysis, the subjects did become inspired to converse about topics of popular concern in a way that was evidently affected by their experience of visiting the museum. In this sense, the “onflow” of cultural co-creation can be said to have been captured in a meaningful and authentic way by combining the methods of the group *dérive*, “walk and talk” recording and narrative analysis. In the course of their conversations, both groups discussed aspects of the museum space and staff (lighting, security concerns, object placement, staff actions) that might prove anecdotally valuable to museum administrators. At the minimum, such observations ought to inspire further inquiry into positive and negative aspects of how people experience the affective design of the museum space. Beyond the operational, the insights shared during the group *dérives* are seeds of infinite value to understanding how the narrative of culture is generated and evolves, observed and recorded at the moment of germination.

In future explorations, it could prove rewarding to be more intentional about the group composition in terms of a broader sampling or a study conducted with multiple small groups. Working with larger groups could prove insightful, although the intimate space of the museum and the intricacies of recording conversation without relying on complicated or obtrusive equipment would likely prove to be a challenge. For his part, Phil Smith recommends a group no larger than 10 individuals for a group *dérive* and, given the layout of the museum and the issues with sound, three individuals managed to provide for a relatively wide demographic sampling and lively, engaged conversation throughout.

Faced with the realization that many systems we have put in place to usurp the role of memory-keeper and guide our cultural evolution are failing, an omnipresent sense of crisis and predictable chain of reactionary responses point to a period of epistemic transition. Following Freud, whose work anticipated and reacted against the epistemic transition which ushered in our current age, it seems well worth reconsidering the ways we record and share the value of the human experience. In presenting the act of cultural co-creation, this paper was intended to provide an example of how interdisciplinary researchers might do the work of capturing the onflow of an expansive, oracular present rather than reinforcing the status quo with an over-reliance on data-driven analysis.

The myriad daily conversations that occur in such spaces augment, secure and enliven both our individual and communal experiences of the world and thus deserve to be valued in the decision-making processes of those elected to be memory-keepers and gatekeepers of culture. For this to happen, interdisciplinary non-representational research must turn fully away from the consumerist, scientific echo-chamber and begin to adopt a public-facing stance, taking an active part in the conversations co-creating culture.

According to the editors of the journal *Qualitative Research* in their special issue focused on public ethnography, it is important to transfer the act of knowledge production and the resulting capture into the field by intentionally weaving in opportunities for strategic public engagement.³⁶ In order to realize the potential of this research framework beyond the academic, and assuming that the ambition of the researcher is to valorize the generative qualities of the human experience of the ineffable or enigmatic, it might be rewarding to incorporate the methodological approach sketched above into what I term a ritual practice of the group *dérive*. This community-based practice could be engaged in and enjoyed by all active co-creators of culture and embraced by museums and heritage site administrators as an important contribution to their mission to create and preserve the memory-keeper function within the auspices of their institutions.

As with any practice centered on epistemological inquiry, this framework is fraught with contradictions to the normative structures that agents of control naturally seek to enforce. The human experience cannot be financialized; no corporate sponsor will seriously fund research into conversation or endow a research university with the facilities to do so. Public-facing non-representational research is thus central to valorizing studies of cultural co-creation. A dollar value cannot be attached to academic research that values the myriad ways people create knowledge and culture as a community, but it is indispensable if we hope to negotiate the current period of epistemic transition with a coherent vision for our future. One of the lesser, though equally dismal alternatives is that our work is doomed to fade into the irrelevance of infinite detail.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendices.** Appendix 1 to 4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v12i1.276.s1>

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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