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Museum times: Changing histories in South Africa



**AUTHOR:**

Leslie Witz

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**REVIEWER:**

Cynthia Kros<sup>1</sup>

**AFFILIATION:**

<sup>1</sup>Honorary Research Associate, Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

**EMAIL:**

Cynthia.kros@uct.ac.za

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# Museum times and times in museums

This is a very rich book – unsurprisingly given what Witz himself remarks is the ‘excess of museum making’ in South Africa after 1994 (p. 115) – and is occasionally overwhelming. Witz, a leading figure in public history based for three decades at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), has an impressive command of the museum literature and the proliferating and shifting museum terrain. The book is also, although not quite, an autobiography. Witz shows how his life and engagements in different capacities with the museum spaces he discusses became ‘intertwined’ (p. 15). This intertwining took root with his appointment at UWC in 1990 when he was caught up in ‘intoxicating’ debates around history (p. 23) and he stresses the importance of collaborative work with colleagues both at UWC and elsewhere. The emerging conception of public history in whose development he played a significant role, opened the way for meaningful engagement with productions of historical knowledge beyond the academy. After a relatively slow start, Witz came to recognise the immense value of museums, especially as sites of intellectual provocation.

Witz became estranged from social history with which he had worked previously, coming to regard his first book *Write Your own History*<sup>1</sup> as representative of the limitations of the social historian’s tendency to write and teach history through a single focal corrective lens. In the empiricist endeavour shared by social history, he argues, museums habitually treat their artefacts as three-dimensional evidence for a history assumed to exist in the singular. Witz remains on guard against the temptation to reach for a unified history.

After 1990, anticipating the transition to democracy, museums took up several challenges, notably of inclusivity and addressing pertinent critiques of their representations of African people. Did museums act, Witz asks, in the way of the simplistic chameleon analogy used in contemporary accounts of the 1990s or more like the chameleon in nature that also uses its powers to attract or confront rather than only as defensive camouflage? The answer is not easy or generalisable. Witz is particularly intrigued by what museums do to time, often in response to new imperatives – lengthening it for millennia of geological history, shortening it to accommodate human memory, beating it out into a linear trajectory or relying on the cyclical dependability of commemoration.

Sometimes imprints left on Witz’s life by the intertwining are evident, especially in the case of the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum with which he was closely involved for 20 years. Two of his chapters, which play with metaphors of beach and sea, wittily and poignantly (given South Africa’s histories of segregation), those on Lwandle near Strand and the Bartolomeu Dias Museum Complex in Mossel Bay, are arguably the most compelling of the emblem-led case study chapters (five of a total six). Lwandle Museum seemed poised to say something regionally distinctive about migrant workers’ experiences. However, the tide often turns against it. The migrant labour narrative, dominated by a Marxist paradigm, has deleterious consequences. Another set of challenges he explores revolves around making a hostel (this chapter’s emblem) the basis for a museum. Witz, his colleagues (including former UWC graduate Bongani Mgijima) and others in Lwandle are tossed about on the high seas of post-apartheid politics and are sometimes sucked further from shore by the riptide of social history. Lwandle not only survives, but also manages to tell some unique stories and holds out the possibility of a different kind of museum.

The Dias Museum boasts a caravel as replica of the one in which Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape in 1488, apparently a faithful reconstruction, but a claim impossible to check because of the absence of contemporary documentation. Significantly, the engine that secretly kept it going on its journey from Portugal to Mossel Bay in the 1980s is below the water line. The impostor caravel attracts a loyal public and Witz’s initial idea of encouraging visitors metaphorically to look below the water line seems nigh impossible to implement. He evaluates the mixed success of temporary exhibitions.

Huberta the fabled hippopotamus, slain by delinquent farmers in 1931 after a journey of well over a thousand kilometres, kept in the Amatole Museum in King William’s Town (now Qonce), for all her apparent solidity, like the caravel is surrounded by mythmaking. In her afterlife, Huberta has travelled an even greater distance than she did as a mortal hippopotamus – from being a fine exemplar of a mammal aligned with director Guy Shortridge’s vision for the former Kaffrarian Museum to embodying the spirit of amaXhosa heroes. In this fascinating chapter on revisiting Huberta, there is also an excellent, if challenging, analysis on limitations of the ‘frontier’ as vehicle for exploring histories of interaction.

Unlike Huberta and the caravel, the rabbit of Robben Island, initially emblematic of liberation that followed years of oppression, is alive. However, whereas Huberta and the caravel ride out the vicissitudes of the tide, the rabbit is marked for extermination. The Robben Island Museum’s experiments with diverging from the linear narrative come to be considered, like the rabbit to be destructive, capable even of undermining the foundations of Mandela’s prison-shrine. Witz’s account of many other forces also closing in around the rabbit sounds daunting. Yet he continues to hold out hope.

Also instructive is the chapter on the moveable *Y350?* Exhibition (2002–2004) whose title offers a nod to millennium bug paranoia as well as an opportunity for interrogating the purpose 350 years later of commemorating Jan Van Riebeeck’s arrival at the Cape, supposedly inaugurating white settlement and ‘civilisation’. Witz’s pathbreaking *Apartheid’s Festival*<sup>2</sup> demonstrated how the 1952 Festival sought to establish Van Riebeeck as an icon to unite the white nation. In *Y350?*, an upside-down statue of Van Riebeeck reprising the protest of 50 years earlier played a prominent role. Witz considers the different meanings the inversion assumed.

It is impossible to cover many aspects of this book, representing as it does decades of professional engagement by an author of considerable stature, and yet, like the Robben Island rabbit, is fleet of foot, incurably curious and temperamentally averse to confinement.

## References

1. Witz L. Write your own history. Johannesburg: Ravan/Sached; 1988.
2. Witz L. Apartheid’s festival. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; 2003.

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