

Diversities Claimed, Displayed and Silenced

Encounters at the New Estonian National Museum

Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, University of Tartu, Estonia, elo-hanna.seljamaa@ut.ee

Inspired by Barbro Klein’s research on silences and exclusions in the Swedish folklife sphere, this article explores how diversity is handled at the new Estonian National Museum, which opened in 2016. While its permanent exhibition *Encounters* makes the bold claim of representing the Estonian territory and its inhabitants from the Stone Age to the present day, a closer look at its contents and design suggests that it does so by repeating, sometimes inadvertently, broader societal silences and stereotypes surrounding ethnic minorities past and present and by sustaining essentialist notions of ethnocultural discreteness. Preference is given to historical minorities already included in the Estonian folklife sphere.



Barbro Klein's Inspiring Scrutiny of the Folklife Sphere

“If people live in a new country and become citizens of it, should they not also be included in its public institutions? It seems to me that inclusions and invitations into the public sphere must take priority over exclusions and silences”, reasoned Barbro Klein in 2006 (2006: 72). Klein was writing about the Swedish folklife sphere and in particular, Swedish museums’ treatment of minorities. Coined by Klein, the term “folklife sphere” is a clever shorthand for “intellectually and historically closely related enterprises” – museums, archives, academic disciplines and popular movements – whose aim has been “to study, preserve, celebrate, present, promote, redesign or sell aspects of vernacular, expressive life forms” (Klein 2004: 129).

In a series of studies published in the 2000s, Klein scrutinised with determination, even passion, the structural exclusions upon which the Swedish folklife sphere was built and the silences and ambiguities it had helped to solidify. Writing against the backdrop of the rapid diversification of Swedish demographics and the government’s awakening to “the fact that the country is ‘multicultural’” (Klein 2000: 5), Klein emphasised the importance of historical reflection for understanding contemporary relationships between the folklife sphere, museum politics, heritage making and cultural diversity. She was equally resolute in her discussion of customs, stories, songs and other vernacular expressive forms as “special resources” for migrants when debating “who they are in relation to others” (Klein 2001: 79). She underlined the importance of studying such traditions, as well as the changes these traditions undergo as people choose to move or are forced to relocate. The lack of research into immigrants’ and minorities’ expressive culture and changes thereof is bound to breed “more silences, stereotypes and unfounded assumptions” (Klein 2003: 85), she argued.

Barbro Klein’s studies of the Swedish folklife sphere serve as enchanting and insightful excursions into the history of “folk” disciplines and institutions in Sweden, encouraging research into exclusions, silences and ambiguities in the folklife spheres of other countries. This article examines the Estonian National Museum (ENM) and its handling of diversity and minorities at its new permanent exhibition on Estonia titled *Encounters (Kohtumised)*. The exhibition was tailor-made for the new museum building that opened in Tartu in October of 2016.

Whereas previous permanent exhibitions of the ENM (1927, 1947, 1994) foregrounded ethnic Estonians’ pre-industrial peasant cultures, *Encounters* set the goal of representing “the Estonian population as a whole, not just speakers of Estonian” (Rattus 2016: 159). Moreover, it sought to cover a period of 11,000 years from the earliest traces of human settlement to the present day. The new ENM aims to provide visitors of diverse sociocultural backgrounds with an opportunity to recognise themselves in the exhibition, “to anchor their identity in Estonian culture” (ibid.). The lead curator

Kristel Rattus has explained that, however unrealistic, the goal of including everybody “since time immemorial” (Rattus 2016: 159) signified “the most important innovation in the institutional identity of the ENM” (ibid.: 145).

As an ethnographer with a long-standing interest in ethnicity, nationalism and diversity management in Estonia, I was intrigued and even a bit overawed by the ENM’s claims of all-encompassing inclusivity. As I have argued elsewhere (Seljamaa 2013), the restored Estonian state has wanted to eat its cake and have it too by pursuing integration policies and models that acknowledge and even celebrate the diverse ethnic make-up of the country, while at the same time nurturing the idea of ethnic Estonians as the core national group with a privileged access to the state. This approach fits what political scientist Rogers Brubaker has described as “nationalizing nationalism”: “The core nation is understood as the legitimate ‘owner’ of the state, which is conceived as the state *of and for* the core nation” (Brubaker 1996: 5).

This ethnonational sense of ownership is coded into Estonian-language words used to make sense of the country’s population. The term and category “Estonian” (*eestlane*) tends to be reserved for ethnic Estonians rather than citizens of Estonia. Similarly, the Estonian word for nationality (*rahvus*) is synonymous with ethnicity, referring to membership in a community of descent, and cultural diversity is predominantly conceived of in terms of ethnicity and national minorities. For example, the opening text of the “Cultural diversity” website operated by the Ministry of Culture states: “There are representatives of around 194 nationalities living in Estonia. Out of the total population, 69% are Estonians by nationality, 25% are Russians, 2% Ukrainians, 1% Belarusians, 0.8% Finns and many other smaller groups.”¹ In the Soviet era, one’s personal nationality/ethnicity was listed in one’s passport. The sense or belief that one was born into a particular ethnic/national category persists, even if mixed family backgrounds or quotidian experiences in managing multiple belongings challenge this essentialist approach (e.g. Lember 2016; Seljamaa 2016).

Set against this background, the goal and claim of the new ENM to focus on and address “the Estonian population as a whole, not just speakers of Estonian” (Rattus 2016: 145) is bold and even radical. It speaks to the wish to transform the role of the ENM in Estonian society according to the principles of new museology (e.g. Macdonald 2006; McCall & Gray 2014). In other words, the team of curators responsible for the new permanent exhibition, have sought to redefine the museum’s relationship to its (potential) audiences, to become more inclusive and accessible and thereby surrender some of its interpretative authority and power, that is, to engage in institutional reflexivity (e.g. Runnel 2013; Rattus 2014; Rattus 2016: 146–147; Tatsi 2013).

¹ Cultural diversity, <https://www.kul.ee/en/activities/cultural-diversity> (accessed November 9, 2020).

Self and other, sameness and difference are mutually constitutive. Much of (folk) culture revolves around articulating the relationships between them (Bauman 1971), as does much research on museums during the past several decades (e.g. contributions to Carbonell 2012; Karp & Lavine 1991; Levitt 2015; Preziosi & Farago 2004; Sherman 2008a; also Bal 1992; Lidchi 1997; Dias 1998). “Whatever their domain, museums, to the extent that they claim to serve a larger community or public, place the relationship between self and other, not only its representation but its very negotiation, at the heart of their practice”, argues Daniel Sherman (2008b: 2). Klein’s folklife sphere signifies a broader domain than just museum studies, and she did not contextualise her work within the new museology. However, she raised similar issues, asking “(h)ow is the heritage of various ethnic Others to be understood in relationship to that which is regarded as Our Own?” (Klein 2006: 57).

Aims and Disclaimers

Inspired by Klein’s research on the relationships between silence, silencing and the Swedish folklife sphere, and sharing the view that museums potentially transform “how people look at their own immediate environs” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991: 410), this article looks at which ethnic or national minorities have been included in ENM’s Encounters; how are they represented and for what purposes; which kinds of “museal silences” (Mason & Sayner 2019; cf. Bal 1992: 561) are produced and reproduced or challenged and how. I argue that Encounters is at times implicitly built on, and at other times falls back on, dominant narratives and points of view that remain implicit and unchallenged.

Some disclaimers and clarifications are needed before proceeding. Encounters is not the only permanent exhibition at the ENM. The other permanent exhibition, *Echo of the Urals (Uurali kaja)*, is dedicated to Finno-Ugric indigenous peoples who lack statehood. There is a long and ongoing tradition in the Estonian humanities and at the ENM of studying related Finno-Ugric peoples, languages and cultures. The two permanent exhibitions were created by separate teams and their concept, display methods and aesthetics differ immensely. The comparison of the two exhibitions would merit a separate study. While I have analysed the Echo of the Urals elsewhere (Seljamaa 2017), this article focuses on the Estonian permanent exhibition and more specifically on *Journeys in Time*, one of the twelve thematic exhibitions that make up Encounters.

My analysis is based on observations made during repeated visits to the new ENM since its opening and on conversations and e-mail correspondence with some of the curators of Encounters. The making of the new Estonian permanent exhibition began in 2008 and over 40 curators are said to have contributed to this process, including not only ethnologists and folklorists, but also specialists in archaeology, history,

cultural communication, semiotics, geography and many other fields. The input of architects, designers, engineers and film-makers was likewise of crucial importance (Rattus 2018: 9). The curators with whom I spoke described the principles followed and stances reached during this multidisciplinary work process and only rarely expressed their individual opinions. My interlocutors further echoed ideas expressed by museum representatives in popular and scholarly articles published before and after the opening of the new building (e.g. Rattus 2014; Rattus 2016; Rattus & Anepaio 2019; Runnel 2013; Runnel & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2010).

The analysis of Encounters provided here, is not that of a museum scholar, however. Drawing on Margaret Lindauer's work (2006: 204), I would at most position myself as a "critical museum visitor" interested in how the design, spatial and written features of the permanent exhibition summon up "an ideal visitor" comfortable with the museum's choices (ibid.). The making of national museums is historically tied to nation- and state-building. As a national museum, the ENM operates in the context of more explicit nationalising political projects at the national level, including partly overlapping citizenship, integration and minority policies. It has also needed to position itself vis-a-vis transnational and global political projects such as European integration or Unesco's emphasis on the promotion and protection of cultural diversity (cf. Aronsson & Elgenius 2011: 10; Eilertsen & Amundsen 2012). As a critical museum visitor studying ethnic interactions and diversity management in Estonia, I am interested in the ENM's understanding of its inclusive agenda and means for pursuing it.

The New Building as a New Beginning

National museums and their architecture (e.g. Giebelhausen 2006) are one of the many symbols through which nations are imagined and made visible. The uneven history of the ENM reflects that of the Estonian state and its people, and the building designed for the purposes of the ENM was in the making for over a century. The idea of a museum dedicated to ethnic Estonians and their cultural expressions was conceived in the latter part of the nineteenth century by intellectuals of Estonian origin. At the time, Estonia was a province of Imperial Russia and undergoing a national awakening (Kasekamp 2010: 76–90). The ENM was inaugurated in 1909 and spent the next several years holding temporary exhibitions and focusing on volunteer collecting and donating. In 1927, the first permanent exhibition was opened in the Raadi Manor estate located a few kilometres from downtown Tartu. The former home of the Liphart noble family, Raadi had been given to the museum in 1922. The complex was destroyed in WWII, leaving the ENM, by then called the State Ethnographic Museum of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, to operate on temporary premises (Kuutma 2011; Nõmmela 2011; Reemann 2011; Tatsi 2013: 13–16).

After the war, an extensive Soviet military airfield and missile base was built at Raadi, restricting civilians' access to Tartu. The first steps to reclaim this area were taken in 1986. The idea of providing buildings of their own to museums and other cultural institutions of high national symbolic value was very much on the agenda of the newly independent state after 1991 (Runnel, Tatsi & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2011; Raisma 2016). After long debates on the location of the new museum building and national architectural competitions (Raisma 2016: 111–117; Reemann 2011: 43–44), the decision was made in 2003 to erect the new ENM building in the vicinity of the former manor complex at Raadi. An editorial in Estonia's largest newspaper *Postimees* hailed “the return of the Estonian National Museum to Raadi” as “a national homecoming”.²

In 2006, the building project was commissioned by means of a new, international architecture competition. The winning entry by a Paris-based international team of young architects was titled “Memory Field” (*Mälestuste väli*) and aimed for “a built allegory for the country's emerging history” (Mairs 2016). The wedge-shaped museum building rises from the runway once used by Soviet bombers, appropriating traces of military occupation into its own space and opening the past to the future (Vaikla 2016). The idea that “the Soviet occupation could be part of the discourse on national identity” (Runnel, Tatsi & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2011: 329) did not come naturally to everyone. Pille Runnel, the long-term Research Director of the ENM, and her colleagues Taavi Tatsi and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt observed that while “the architects thought spatially” and “aimed to find a symbol through which to open up the contested issues of the recent history of the nation and give the control back to the people through spatial means”, the general public sought to restore the nation by means of reconnecting to the pre-Second World War past (ibid.: 331).

These tensions carried over into expectations concerning the contents and functions of the new ENM. Runnel, Tatsi and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (2011: 334) found that the public conceived of culture as a bounded entity and of the ENM as a depository for mono-ethnic national culture. In 2006 the Museum Council, an advisory council to the Ministry of Culture, had laid out the main principles of development of Estonian museums for 2006–2015 that similarly emphasised the need to secure the continuation of the Estonian national identity and way of life.³ A comparative study of museum policies in Europe in 1990–2010 found that such an agenda was common to several

² Ja saagu muuseum! [Let there be a museum!]. *Postimees* July 31, 2003, <https://arvamus.postimees.ee/2038563/ja-saagu-muuseum> (accessed November 9, 2020).

³ 21. sajandi Eesti muuseumid. Arengu põhisuunad 2006–2015 [Estonian museums of the 21st century. Main directions of development 2006–2015], https://www.kul.ee/sites/kulminn/files/kum_muuseumid_arengu_pohisuunad_2006_2015.pdf (accessed March 10, 2021).

of the “new” European states (Eilertsen & Amundsen 2012: 7). Museum professionals developing the ENM, on the contrary, approached “the museum as a particular kind of communication institution, a place that potentially enables changes in what we know and how we think about things, a place that influences attitudes and becomes a laboratory of value systems and identities” (Runnel, Tatsi & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2011: 335; cf. Rattus 2014: 103).

The prospect of the new building and its design prompted the ENM to rethink its goals, identity and communication strategies and to align them with the principles of new museology. This included framing museum visitors as partners who share with museums a responsibility – and the power – to collect and interpret heritage (e.g. Runnel & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2010; Tatsi 2013: 9; Tatsi 2011). Dialogue, one of the key concepts of Encounters, speaks to the same ethos, standing for the curators’ goal of fostering two-way communication with diverse societal groups and to empower audiences (Rattus & Anepaio 2019: 95–96). Topics are to be depicted from multiple perspectives without reducing controversies (Rattus & Anepaio 2019: 97; cf. Rattus 2014). The other key concept, everyday culture, as something that is experienced by all people through all times (Rattus 2016: 148), is similarly suited to bringing people together. The makers of Encounters explained that they were interested in “the stories of the historically lesser-known people and objects”, using them as entrance points to major processes and phenomena in Estonian history (Rattus 2016: 148).

Before looking at how Encounters puts these theoretical underpinnings into practice, it must be recognised and underlined that the stated goal of the new ENM to represent “the Estonian population as a whole, not just speakers of Estonian” (Rattus 2016: 159) and to “provide *all* audiences with thought-provoking materials rather than just comfort blankets” (Runnel, Tatsi & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2011: 335; emphasis in the original) signifies a conscious effort to rethink the connection between the state and nation in the role of the ENM. This has the potential to expand the Estonian folklife sphere. These efforts are linked thematically to and constitute a coherent whole with the architecture of the new museum building that mimics a runway built by and for occupying forces, turning it into a platform for rethinking the past and bringing about changes now and in the future.⁴

⁴ The building and the two permanent exhibitions of the new ENM have received various national and international recognition, including the 2018 Kenneth Hudson Award of the European Museum Forum, several annual prizes of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia and of the Estonian Museum Association, the AFEX (French Architects abroad) Grand Prix; Echo of the Urals is the recipient of the European Design Award (Tunnustused, [Recognitions], <https://erm.ee/et/content/tunnustused>, accessed November 9, 2020; Vaikla 2016).

“Definitely not an easy exhibition for visitors”

Encounters has at its disposal nearly 3,500 square metres or over 37,600 square feet. Covering a period of 11,000 years, it zooms in on cultural changes and events that are presumed to have affected the majority of people living on the Estonian territory at particular times (Rattus 2016: 148). Encounters is comprised of twelve thematic exhibitions dedicated to such topics as urbanisation, home furnishings, culinary culture, environment, textiles, farm work, Estonia’s political development and the Estonian language. Of central importance – and the focus of this article – is the exhibition titled *Journeys in Time (Ajarajal)*, which takes visitors on a tour of Estonian history. In accordance with the architects’ vision of openness, the exhibition hall has two entrances facing each other. *Journeys in Time*, placed on the continuum between these two end or starting points, follows a chronological order from the present day (The Time of Freedoms) to the Stone Age or vice versa, depending on which entrance is used. Visitors can and indeed are invited (Vaikla 2016) to read the exhibition from two directions. This, along with the lack of physical dividers between the different time periods, potentially disrupts the linearity of this evolutionary narrative, as do other thematic exhibitions scattered throughout the enormous hall that occasionally intersect with *Journeys in Time* (see **Figure 1**). While some of the thematic exhibitions have clearly-marked physical boundaries, others do not. It is easy to get disoriented in space and lost in time. As the lead curator has admitted, “‘Encounters’ is definitely not an easy exhibition for visitors” (Rattus 2016: 160).



Figure 1: Encounters and journeys in time from the present day to the Stone Age and back, from contemporary inhabitants of Estonia to Netsilik Inuits. (Photo: Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, October 2018).

The collections of the ENM are vast: there are more than 100,000 ethnographic artefacts related to Estonia alone.⁵ With a few exceptions, Encounters features original objects. Besides artefacts, the exhibition makes use of, among others, court protocols, diaries, memoirs, archaeological findings, and even fiction. In the words of the curators, Encounters “stages” dialogues by means of “juxtaposing original objects of different social and cultural groups” and individuals, on the one hand, and by using “interpretative media, e.g. databases, installations, newly staged films and visual representations of researchers’ hypotheses”, on the other (Rattus 2017: 4). Some installations make a convincing case for “dialogue” as both a theoretical underpinning and a practical working method in that they succeed in conveying the complexity of historical events, processes and phenomena by means of juxtaposing “personal stories of people of different gender, class, ethnicity and age” (Rattus & Anepaio 2019: 96).

The cataclysmic Russian Revolution of 1905, significant from the point of view of the Estonian national movement, is discussed in the form of three staged films that are based on the memories of three contemporaries affected by the upheaval: an educated urban Estonian woman who participated in Tallinn in the historic mass demonstration that turned to bloodshed, a Baltic German baron whose estate was looted by peasants and workers, and an Estonian manor servant, who witnessed the violence committed by the squad sent to the countryside to punish the rebels. Another video installation depicts witch trials in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Estonia by means of three screens and from the perspective of villagers accused of witchcraft, their neighbours’ testifying against them, and Baltic German officials acting as judges. Both installations are accompanied by explanatory texts, yet it is up to museum visitors to synthesise the different, even contradictory accounts of the same events. The aim of the newly staged films was to “intensify the exhibition experience and create an emotional closeness with the topic” (Rattus 2016: 154). This confirms the observation that “(a)t the exhibition stage, decisions about which stories are to be privileged may well be made based on assumptions about the meaningfulness and affective power of such voices for the visitor of the present and the future” (Mason & Sayner 2019: 7).

Other dialogues aim at spanning vast territories and several millennia. The part of *Journeys in Time* dedicated to the Stone Age begins with a juxtaposition of seal hunting on the Baltic Sea around 9,000 years ago and among Netsilik Inuits in the 1960s. While I was told that this solution seeks to illustrate the comparative working methods of scholars studying the very distant past, the critical museum visitor in me doubts the comprehensibility of sophisticated layers of this kind. What comes across more easily

⁵ Collections: <https://erm.ee/en/content/collections> (accessed March 10, 2021).

is the idea that the Netsilik Inuits' twentieth century corresponds to the Stone Age of Estonia's inhabitants, and that by equating the two historical eras, the installation ranks the Netsilik Inuits as more "primitive" than present-day Estonians. Inuit seal hunters are frozen in the past, denied history and coevalness.⁶ At the same time, they are put in the service of establishing historical continuity between contemporary and prehistoric inhabitants of Estonia. It is a widely held view in Estonia that ethnic Estonians are indigenous peoples whose ancestors have lived on the Estonian territory for nearly 10,000 years, and this idea has been used to emphasise their privileged relationship to the Estonian land and state in the present day.⁷ It is these notions of Estonianness that the exhibition stops short of scrutinising.

Contained for Good?

Encounters makes use of a variety of display styles (e.g. Lindauer 2006: 209–210; Lidchi 1997), including tall transparent cylinders. I was told at the ENM that the rationale behind the design of showcases was to enable visitors to get closer to the original objects and to view them from different angles. Although practical, this approach comes with a baggage of essentialism and reification to be discussed in this section. My focus is on *The Era of Books*, a subsection of *Journeys in Time* that covers a period of roughly 500 years, from the fifteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was during these centuries that the ethnic make-up of Estonian population gradually took shape, only to be remade over the course of the Second World War.

The Era of Books offers staged videos, interactive installations and screens of other kinds, yet the main method for "staging dialogue" (Rattus 2017) is the juxtaposition of objects associated with various social groups and spheres of life. The area is dotted with cylindrical showcases filled with artefacts. Two showcases placed side by side illustrate differences between the manor and the farm, between the lifestyle and living conditions of landlords and those of peasants. One cylinder is tall, the other one short, as if to mark contrasts between manor and peasant architecture (see **Figure 2**). The tall cylinder contains an upholstered Baroque chair made of mahogany, and the short one a simple wooden chair; a chandelier is juxtaposed with a splinter holder, and a cookie

⁶ Fabian (1983)2014. Compare Bal (1992) on the representation of Koryaks at the American Museum of Natural History.

⁷ For example, Kotkajärve Forest University, the annual summer school of diaspora Estonians, issued in 2017 a statement that Estonians ought to declare themselves indigenous peoples in the sense of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Kotkajärve Metsaülikooli avaldus eesti rahvale [Statement of the Kotkajärve Forest University to the Estonian people]. *Vaba Eesti Sõna internetiväljaanne/Free Estonian Word Weekly Internet Edition*, September 3, 2017, <http://www.vabaeestisona.com/index.php/kohalikud-uudised/8295-kotkajaerve-metsaueelikooli-avaldus-eesti-rahvale.html>, accessed March 11, 2021). This statement made it to mainstream press in Estonia (Kiin 2017).

mould with a tool used for making bread. Though the accompanying texts refer to communications between landlords and peasants, the display style gives the impression that manors and farms constituted separate and hermetically sealed timeless domains. Until the nineteenth century, social class was inseparable from ethnicity: moving up on the social ladder meant Germanisation. Thus implicitly, this juxtaposition of manor and farm is about class and ethnicity.



Figure 2: The showcases representing manor and farm, Baltic Germans and Estonians. (Photo: Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, October 2018).

Transparent cylindrical showcases dedicated to discrete phenomena draw attention to the division of space between different groups and topics. The Era of Books features two showcases presenting three historical minorities: Baltic Germans, Coastal Swedes and Russian Old Believers. All three have, since 1993, been legally recognised as “national

minorities” (*vähemusrahvus*)⁸ on the basis, among other criteria, of their “long-term, sound and permanent ties with Estonia” (National Minorities Cultural Autonomy Act).⁹

Baltic Germans have been given a cylinder of their own, which seems to underline and correspond to their important role in Estonian history. The showcase featuring Baltic Germans as a social group is furnished with symbols of their high social status, professionalism and privilege: tokens of hereditary power, exotic artefacts brought back by explorers from trips to faraway places, university diplomas and other certificates, and objects testifying to their intellectual interests and a life of leisure.

Next to Baltic Germans, squeezed into one cylinder, are Russian Old Believers and Coastal Swedes. The latter moved to Estonia’s north-western coast and some of its islands between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries; the former settled on the shores of Lake Peipsi in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The objects used are easily recognisable and readily associated with these groups (cf. Klein 2006: 61). They include religious paraphernalia and fishing nets as well as seal-hunting gear and maritime artefacts. Both displays include items associated with both men and women, and texts accompanying the objects give information about the geographic origin of particular artefacts.

As I learned when talking to the curators of Encounters, the display introducing Old Believers was assembled with input from Old Believers living in Estonia today, and the ENM’s interest in the folk culture of Lake Peipsi Russians goes back to the 1990s (Kuutma 2011: 247). My more detailed queries about the display of Coastal Swedes have so far gone unanswered. However, the first objects collected from Coastal Swedes reached the ENM as early as 1912, and expeditions to the territories they used to inhabit continued throughout the Soviet era (Õunapuu 1989).

Both Old Believers and Coastal Swedes were represented at the previous permanent exhibition of the ENM, *Estonia: Land, People, Culture*, opened in the temporary museum building in 1994 (Reemann 2011). At the time, representations of these people were included in the section dedicated to “regional particularities” as examples of “agrarian

⁸ *Vähemusrahvused* or “national minorities” are contrasted with *rahvusvähemused* or minorities who lack comparable historical presence.

⁹ The 1993 act was based on analogous pre-war legislation. In the 1925 Law on Cultural Self-Government and National Minorities was passed, which defined as national minorities and granted the right to cultural autonomy to Germans, Russians, Swedes and “those national minorities living within the borders of Estonia that numbered not less than 3,000” (Matsulevitš 1993: 41). In reality, only Germans and Jews used the opportunity to establish a cultural self-government in 1925 and 1926, respectively. However, also Swedes, Russians, Latvians and Ingrian Finns led active cultural lives, collaborating with the state on educational matters in particular (e.g. materials from the National Archives reprinted in Matsulevitš 1993). The situation changed in the years preceding WWII, as a result of both the authoritarian regime established in 1934 and developments in the international arena (e.g. see Kranking 2007 on Swedes).

subcultures” (ibid.: 47–48). Baltic Germans, on the other hand, were dealt with in the part of the exhibition that looked at economic and cultural “changes and influences” by means of, among other things, displaying examples of Baltic German manor interior design (ibid.). According to Kristin Kuutma (2011: 247), these representations lacked references to ethnicity, but involved nation-building via class distinctions: “the Swedish and Russian Old Believer communities have been considered socially equal to the majority group of ethnic Estonians, while the Baltic Germans represented ‘landlords’, the suppressing upper class and nobility, and therefore inherently alien outsiders to the national imagery.”

Opened over two decades later, the new permanent exhibition offers a more nuanced interpretation. Germans in particular are implicitly but undeniably present in various parts of Encounters as crusaders, warriors, landowners and clergymen, doctors and scholars, merchants, industrialists, writers, translators and creators of written Estonian. The space allocated to Coastal Swedes and Old Believers is much smaller, so much so that they are made to share one showcase. However, I would argue that it is by virtue of placing these three groups side by side that *The Era of Books* places Baltic Germans on a par with Coastal Swedes and Old Believers, framing all three as Estonia’s historical ethnic minorities. Texts accompanying the artefacts explain that not all Germans were wealthy and draw attention to regional variation in the culture of Coastal Swedes scattered across the north-western coast and smaller islands. However, the internal heterogeneity of these groups is not a topic in itself and is not visualised purposefully. What matters more in the context of Encounters is ethnicity, not class.

Much could be speculated about the reasons behind the decision to split one cylinder between agrarian and sedentary Coastal Swedes and Old Believers, while the worldly Baltic Germans have a showcase to themselves. My interlocutors at the ENM, perhaps surprised at my obsession with this question, mentioned insufficient funds and space. Resources pose real problems, as do complex issues of power that are at play whenever museum representations are created. The combination of Coastal Swedes and Old Believers stands out against the background of countless other cylindrical showcases dedicated to one particular phenomenon or group, be it Baltic Germans, the Orthodox Church, Lutheranism or Soviet-era shoes. If it were not for such emphasis on the separation among thematic categories, the treatment of Coastal Swedes and Old Believers would perhaps not be as noticeable and raise questions about hierarchies created and conveyed by means of display styles and choices.

Texts accompanying the displays of Coastal Swedes and Baltic Germans use the past tense, while both past and present tenses are used to contextualise the objects representing Old Believers. Some of the objects date to the 1920s or possibly even later decades, but the story of these groups in Encounters seems to end with *The Era of Books*.

There is no mention of the fact that virtually all Germans left Estonia by 1941 as part of *Umsiedlung*, the resettlement of Baltic Germans in Germany and in eastern territories taken from Poland. Those with little prior knowledge of Estonia might be hard-pressed to believe that descendants of Coastal Swedes are active in present-day Estonia, running their own cultural self-government.¹⁰ Historical minorities are included, but then frozen in time and left hanging in the air without fully exploring their relationships to the surrounding world and changes therein, and to contemporary Estonia.

Henrietta Lidchi (1997: 173) observes how glass cases establish distance between artefacts and viewers and give objects “individual identities”, making manifest the work involved in representation. Transparent cylindrical cases filled with an array of artefacts underline “the dislocation and re-contextualization that is at the root of collecting and exhibiting” (ibid.). At the same time, they lend the groups and phenomena on display a sense of discreteness and contribute to their reification. Moreover, placing selected groups in containers of “their own” raises questions about those that are not singled out in this manner. Do they not matter or matter less? Or are they unmarked by virtue of representing the taken-for-granted norm? Perhaps most importantly, if all vision is embodied and particular (Haraway 1988), from where does the gaze singling out these particular groups emanate? The final sections of this article look at other parts of *Journeys in Time* that give rise to similar questions.

Parallel or Intersecting Lives

Encounters is innovative, among other things, in dedicating several themed exhibitions to the Second World War and Soviet years, while also reaching out to Estonia’s Russian-speaking population (e.g. Rattus & Anepaio 2019: 98). These topics were excluded from the previous permanent exhibition opened in 1994, and the Soviet era continues to be a sensitive topic, as demonstrated by heated discussion surrounding the conceptual architecture of the new ENM. The part of *Journeys in Time* that looks at the Second World War and the subsequent Soviet era is titled *Life Behind the Iron Curtain*. One of its sections, *Goings and Comings*, combines the already familiar cylindrical showcases with video installations to sum up Estonia’s experiences of the war and its outcomes by means of three key words: deportation, escape, and immigration. Over 30,000 inhabitants of Estonia were deported or imprisoned and sent to Siberia between 1941 and 1953. Over 70,000 made an attempt to escape before the ultimate Soviet takeover and many succeeded, settling in Sweden, England, the United States, Canada and Australia, among others (Kasekamp 2010: 124–139). Demographers have estimated that up to 2.9 million people from other parts of the Soviet Union moved to and through Estonia in

¹⁰ Estlandssvenskarnas Kulturförvaltning, <http://www.eestirootslane.ee/sv/> (accessed March 11, 2021).

the years 1946–1991, and though many did not stay for long, the proportion of foreign-born inhabitants grew steadily and reached nearly 40% by 1989 (Sakkeus 1999: 320).

Goings and Comings features three video screens that tell the life story of a deportee, a refugee, and an immigrant, and three showcases filled with personal items of deportees, refugees and immigrants (see **Figure 3**). These include household items and garments, decorative objects, toys, handicrafts, letters, family heirlooms. Each item is accompanied by a short text that tells the story of the artefact and that of its makers, users or owners.



Figure 3: The exhibition Goings and Comings is built around objects and stories of deportees, refugees and immigrants. (Photo: Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, October 2018).

Like the comparison of the manor and farm discussed above, the juxtaposition of deportations, escape, and immigration is ethnically laden: the deportees and refugees were, for the most part, ethnic Estonians, while immigrants came from Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union, representing Estonians' linguistic and ethnic "others". Missing from this picture are those inhabitants of Estonia, mostly ethnic Estonians, who were neither deported nor escaped, but stayed put during the war and became citizens of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. They constituted the majority and their absence from the part of Encounters that most explicitly addresses the Second World War seems to echo Estonia's thorny relationship with the war and the Soviet era. Though Estonia declared itself neutral in WWII, its inhabitants were forced and chose to fight in the ranks of both Soviet and German armed forces. Estonians were not only victims and objects of Sovietisation, but also agents of the new regime and perpetrators.

These continue to be difficult and murky topics, and it could be argued that by avoiding them Encounters engages in noncommunication “for the sake of the whole system” (Bateson & Bateson [1987]2005: 89), in other words post-Soviet Estonian statehood. This has implications for Encounters’ representation of immigrants/minorities. By focusing on deportations, escape and immigration, Goings and Comings presents ethnic Estonians first and foremost as victims, also of Soviet Russification policies embodied by Soviet-era immigrants. Moreover, the design of the display built around screens and cylindrical containers emphasises the separateness of these categories and a lack of interconnections between persons assigned to them, which has been one of the tenets of ethnic nationalism in Estonia.

Parallel Worlds. Parallel Lives, another major themed exhibition of Encounters, offers a more nuanced treatment of the Cold War. This exhibition is built around personal objects and autobiographies of 15 individuals who were born in the 1930s and 1940s and tied to Estonia in one way or another. Besides deportees, refugees and immigrants, visitors are introduced to persons who lived in Estonia their entire life, left it for other parts of the Soviet Union or entered into mixed marriages. Instead of being piled into glass tubes, objects, photographs and archival documents are displayed in individual cases that are accessible from two sides. The luminous display cases fitted in dark pillar-like walls create a cave-like atmosphere that sets the exhibition apart from its surroundings. In the words of curators they attempted “to create a space in which simultaneous experiences and life-worlds *proceed in parallel without intersecting*” (Rattus & Anepaio 2019: 99; emphasis added).

I would argue that the design of this space nevertheless allows for intersections to emerge. The showcases have reflective glass and are mirrored in each other and it is also possible to look through the multiple transparent glass showcases. Objects that represent “other” life-worlds, different destinies and trajectories linked to Estonia become entangled and indistinguishable. Even so, the curators’ attempts to represent the separateness of the experiences of Estonians and Russian-speaking Soviet-era immigrants, that is, the assumption that their lives “proceeded in parallel without intersecting”, is telling of interethnic communication or lack thereof in Estonia. It is also indicative of the role of language as a marker of (ethnic) identity and as a constitutive element of (segregated) life worlds in Estonia. Describing the process of recruiting Russian-speaking participants for *Parallel Worlds. Parallel Lives* in an article published after the opening of the new ENM, the curators reflected on the museum’s (in)ability to reach out to Estonia’s diverse population groups. At the same time, they expressed hope that Russian-speakers’ stories would help other Russian-speakers to find their way to the ENM (Rattus & Anepaio 2019: 102).

Inclusion without Invitation?

The goal of Encounters to represent everybody who has lived on the Estonian territory “since time immemorial” (Rattus 2016: 159) does not entail a systematic overview of the gradual changes in the ethnic composition of the population. Visitors do not learn that Jews started to settle in Estonia in greater numbers in the first half of the nineteenth century and Tatars in the century’s second half; most Roma found in Estonia before WWII arrived around the same time and at the beginning of the twentieth century (Viikberg 1999). All in all, the 1934 census counted representatives of 51 ethnicities (Hallik 2010: 8).

Modern Times, the subsection of Journeys in Time that looks at the period from the early nineteenth century to the Second World War focuses on the gradual modernisation of society and the emergence of the Estonian nation and state without paying much attention to minorities’ waxing and waning role therein. Even so, minorities do pop up. Tucked away in one of the alcoves is a small display that seeks to convey the hustle and bustle of public fair days of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Viewers are introduced to horse-trading and to haberdashers, exposed to crafts associated with particular regions of Estonia such as pottery made by the Seto people. Also shown are fair entertainers such as an instant photographer and a fortune teller. The latter are characters in two interactive video installations that engage viewers by asking them to step closer to have their photos taken or fortunes told.

The videos are new, made for the purposes of the ENM. The text accompanying the fortune-telling video explains that “(a)t Estonian fairs, fortune tellers were generally ethnic Roma; the women were palm readers and Tarot readers”. Looking at the video screen, one is confronted by a middle-aged woman, a well-known Estonian actress with no attachment to the Roma. Her complexion and hair are fair, but her appearance reflects stereotypical images of the Roma and of Roma culture. The woman is wearing a black garment with exotic embroidery, a matching headscarf and eye-catching jewellery; her blonde hair hangs freely and her hands lay cards on a black floral shawl. All in all, her outfit and accessories bring to mind those used in “Gypsy dances”, a genre popular in amateur dance ensembles in Estonia, many of which build on Soviet/Russian traditions of classical ballet and character dance.

On my first encounter with this installation, a series of questions rushed through my mind. Given the ENM’s wish to foster two-way communication and include diverse societal groups, I could not understand why the Roma were being represented by a culturally Estonian woman dressed up as a Roma. Did the creators of the exhibition consult Roma living in Estonia today? Did they think about stigmas attached to the Roma, including those related to fortune telling? More broadly, what is the relationship

between representations of minorities at Encounters and the representatives of these same people in present-day Estonia and the world?

In studying the Estonian Roma, ethnologist Eva-Liisa Roht-Yilmaz (2019) has raised some of the same concerns, wondering why the creators of Encounters did not reach out to local Roma activists and organisations to collaborate and create new data where the Roma are not represented in the collections of the ENM (cf. Klein 2000: 10–11 on the Swedish folklife sphere's relationship to the Roma). After all, curators cast their nets widely and combined sources of different kinds elsewhere. In the view of Roht-Yilmaz (2019), the ENM missed out on the opportunity to include Roma people in Estonian cultural history, even though the topic of fairs would have been ideally suited for this purpose. The Roma were part and parcel of fairs, being among other things horse traders (Anepaio 1996), but there are no references to Roma men in the description of horse-trading.

The video installation with the fortune teller is all the more unexpected because in 2013 the ENM initiated and co-produced the photo exhibition *We, the Gypsies (Meie, mustlased)*, which aimed to show the everyday life of Roma in contemporary Estonia and challenge stereotypes (Purret 2013). In June 2018, an international festival of Roma culture was held on the new premises of the ENM.¹¹ As other scholars have observed (Eilertsen & Amundsen 2012: 10; Klein 2006: 60; Mason & Sayner 2019: 11–12), it is one thing for museums to hold temporary exhibitions and one-time events dedicated to “hidden” or marginalised topics and peoples. It is quite another to grant them a permanent space on their own terms.

Stereotypes are no less harmful when presented in a playful, ambiguous manner. On the contrary, such representations tend to be even harder to confront. A 2011 country report commissioned by the European Commission found that Roma in Estonia suffer “from stigmatisation and structural discrimination that manifests specially in realms of education, employment and cultural stereotypes” (Viies 2011: 12). The ENM representatives with whom I spoke shared some of my concerns and expressed hesitancy over the fortune teller's looks. Among other things, the video installation seems to illustrate the perils of museum workers' collaborations with film-makers not accustomed to ethnographic reflexivity. Moreover, scholars may be reluctant to single out ethnic differences in an effort to avoid stereotyping or exoticising minorities, yet “the upshot can also be that other cultures, religions and languages stand out as something disagreeable that should be avoided” (Klein 2006: 72). As Roht-Yilmaz

¹¹ Mustlasfestival “Romanõ Tšergen” [Gypsy festival “Romanõ Tšergen”], <https://www.erm.ee/et/events/mustlasfestival-romanõ-tšergen> (accessed March 10, 2021).

pointed out in a personal communication referring to my own blind spots, fortune telling need not have negative undertones as it has historically been one of the trades of Roma women and continues to be a cherished tradition.¹²

The majority of the Roma who settled in Estonia before the Second World War perished during the German occupation of 1941–1944 (Weiss-Wendt 2003). Conversations with colleagues at the ENM left me asking whether the Roma living in Estonia today were not seen by them to constitute a legitimate dialogue partner because most of the present-day Roma arrived later. With a few exceptions, they have no connection to the Roma who inhabited Estonia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A similar rationale could be used to explain the absence of Jews. It would mean that the invitation to the ENM's public sphere is limited to those minority groups whose living representatives are descendants of much earlier ones in Estonia and, moreover, to groups that are sedentary rather than mobile.

Concluding Remarks

Having been in the making for over a century, the new Estonian National Museum (ENM) is a landmark in the history of Estonia and its people. The conceptual architecture of the new museum building challenges the Estonian public to frame the country's Soviet past as part of the national narrative and in doing so, supports the ENM in its quest for a new kind of museum that would actively and openly communicate with diverse audiences and engage them in knowledge production rather than serving merely as a depository for the nation's treasures (cf. Runnel, Tatsi & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2011).

By virtue of its ambitious goal of representing the cultural history of the Estonian territory and its people from the Stone Age to the present day, Encounters, the ENM's new permanent Estonian exhibition, makes implicit claims regarding all of the country's ethnic minorities. A closer look at its core sub-exhibition Journeys in Time offers glimpses of various groups, while also revealing exclusions and silences which reflect broader societal silences and at times are amplified by the exhibition's design. While the creators of Encounters claim that the selections and interpretations on display are theirs and thus acknowledge their partiality, the exhibition does not explain the rationale behind these choices: for example, the reasons for choosing particular minorities and excluding others. Preference seems to be given to minorities who have previously been included in the Estonian folklife sphere: Baltic Germans, Coastal Swedes and Old Believers, who have already been imagined and framed as belonging to Estonia in diverse contexts, including the National Minorities Cultural Autonomy Act.

¹² Personal correspondence, June 14, 2019.

If there is anything surprising about their presence at the new ENM, it is the decision to contain them in the past and to not seize the opportunity to discuss their continued existence in Estonia under different political regimes. Missing from the exhibition are Jews and other minorities who cannot be easily represented as homogeneous groups contained in rural areas and characterised by a distinctive folk culture, which is how ethnic Estonians have been imagined and presented in contexts such as the ENM.

Although the Roma are included to a small extent, this inclusion does not amount to an invitation to the public sphere. However, *some* representation may still be better than no representation at all if the ENM, in accordance with its vision of fostering bidirectional communication and empowering audiences, seizes the opportunity and enters into a conversation with the local Roma in an effort to make its description of Roma presence in Estonia “thicker” and more inclusive of the actual Roma individuals living in Estonia today. In an article published after the opening of the new ENM, members of the curatorial team describe the process of “building a bridge at the level of individuals and smaller groups” that they have been engaging in recently, seeing it as a precondition for a dialogue that is yet to come (Rattus & Anepaio 2019: 102). In this respect, it is interesting to note that even though the makers of *Journeys in Time* collaborated with representatives of Old Believers and presumably some of some other groups featured at the exhibition, these partnerships are not made visible, though they could and possibly should as part of the process of democratising the museum (cf. Runnel & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2010).

For now, *Journeys in Time* seems to be treading lightly when it comes to challenging the status quo and positionings that could shift ingrained patterns of thought. The inclusion of stories and artefacts of Soviet-era immigrants in a permanent exhibition does signify a major shift in the ENM’s self-perception. At the same time, the critical viewer in me argues that there is nothing unorthodox about the way *Journeys in Time* contextualises these stories and artefacts and the people they represent: framing Soviet-era newcomers as immigrants associated with Soviet Russification policies follows the established dominant narrative template and solidifies the ambiguous position of these people in post-Soviet Estonia. By reproducing broader societal silences, the ENM participates in broader political projects that construct people’s belonging to a collectivity known as Estonians. Yet beyond merely shaping belonging, these same projects are simultaneously constructing the community itself (cf. Yuval-Davis 2006: 197). Museums and cultural institutions can be thought more broadly of as falling along a cosmopolitan-nationalism continuum (Levitt 2015: 3). What is put on display depends, among others, on “(w)here a country is in the arc of its nation-building and global claims-staking projects, and the kinds of citizens it believes it needs

in order to reach its goals” (ibid.: 3–4). The country’s or city’s approach to diversity management plays a role (ibid.), but there could be myriad reasons that prevent a museum from putting its emancipated theory into practice (cf. Lindauer 2006: 222).

Journeys in Time seems to merely scratch the surface when it comes to interconnections and everyday interactions between local residents of different ethnic, linguistic, social, religious and political backgrounds. Instead, it highlights the discreteness of ethnic groups. Carefully composed and sophisticated texts accompanying and contextualising the displays draw attention to cultural exchanges and commonalities across ethnic lines, yet showcases dominate the exhibition. Identical transparent containers that can be juxtaposed but not merged convey the same essentialist notion of ethnic cultures as self-contained, bounded units that ethnologists, folklorists and cultural anthropologists have been distancing themselves from for the past several decades, not least in an effort to avoid overlaps between the study and practice of nationalism.

In sum, in my interpretation the museum set out to deconstruct an earlier Herderian nation-building project, only to fall back on it. Fluent in cutting-edge theory, the permanent exhibition Encounters is ahead of its time and yet immersed in this same Herderian paradigm. Encounters perpetuates essentialist ideas of ethnocultural separateness despite – or, indeed, by virtue of – its all-encompassing inclusivity. This gives renewed significance to Barbro Klein’s (2006: 57) question: “[H]ow is the heritage of various ethnic Others to be understood in relationship to that which is regarded as Our Own?” Encounters breaks new ground by broadening the scope of what is included in Estonian cultural history and by re-framing and repositioning selected “ethnic Others” who are already included in the folklife sphere. Yet it does this in ways that leave established notions of “Our Own” unchallenged and even undisclosed. Much of the ENM’s new permanent Estonian exhibition implicitly and perhaps inadvertently represents the perspective of ethnic Estonians who can afford to remain silent and silence others. Recognising this particular point of view and the privileges inherent in it is of crucial importance for realising the full potential of the Estonian National Museum.

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Elo-Hanna Seljamaa is an associate professor at the University of Tartu Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore and directs the international Master's programme "Folkloristics and Applied Heritage Studies". Since earning her PhD from the Ohio State University in 2012, she has explored topics related to nationalism, ethnicity and diversity in Estonia, most recently as the Principal Investigator of the project "Performative Negotiations of Belonging in Contemporary Estonia" (PSG48).

(elo-hanna.seljamaa@ut.ee)

