

Seized: Performance Autoethnography in the UK Border Force National Museum

Cami Rowe

Abstract

This article examines representations of border security within public museums, through the example of the UK Border Force National Museum. It begins by discussing the way that international borders are theatrically experienced, and the parallel characteristics of museum spaces. I then suggest the value of performance autoethnography when analysing such phenomena, which arises from the ability to creatively situate personal experience alongside institutional scripts of border control. The article then presents a performance autoethnography that illustrates my experiences within the Border Force museum. This provides new insights into the theatrical framing of the museum and its effect on visitor interpretations. The article demonstrates that the Border Force museum replicates the theatricality of border control sites, and thus supports the ordering of bodies into insiders and outsiders; however, creative methods for knowledge production might offer a means of challenging existing border taxonomies, especially when personal experience is circulated through theatrical means.

Keywords: Borders, Museums, Migration, Performance, Autoethnography, Theatricality

Introduction

This article addresses the representation of international borders and border security in museums, using performance autoethnography to investigate the ways that exhibits reflect the border's hierarchical ordering of bodies. Through an analysis of the author's embodied experiences within the Border Force National Museum in Liverpool and the creative processes that flowed from this experience, the theatricality of the museum's exhibits is uncovered and likened to the ways that performance is bound up in the construction of borders in the outside world. This approach demonstrates that by attending closely to a researcher's own memories, affect and creative imaginings, new insights can be derived about the categorisation of bodies as insiders or outsiders at border control sites.

Politics and IR scholars have established the close relationship between international relations and museum exhibitions,¹ and studies from a range of disciplines have addressed

¹ e.g., Audrey Reeves, 'Auto-Ethnography and the Study of Affect and Emotion in World Politics: Investigating Security Discourses at London's Imperial War Museum' in *Researching Emotions in International Relations*, eds. Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 103-27; Christine Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Joanna Tidy and Joe Turner, 'The Intimate International Relations of Museums: a Method', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48, no. 2 (2019): 117-42.

the representation of migrants in museums, monuments and other cultural institutions.² This latter body of research tends to focus on the manner and extent to which border-crossing experiences are included in cultural narratives. In some cases though, museums address international borders from a policy-oriented perspective, by focusing on national border enforcement practices including customs, anti-smuggling activities, and in some cases immigration control.³

One example of this nature is the Border Force National Museum, which depicts UK customs and immigration control from the 18th century to the present day. This museum was established in 2009, in the wake of a formal partnership between National Museums Liverpool and UK Border Force.⁴ It is publicly billed as the ‘Seized!’ gallery; a major focus is the smuggling of illegal or counterfeit goods into the UK, as well as efforts by authorities to combat these crimes. Paired with this is the topic of immigration control, with a notable presence of immigration-related content throughout.

In order to examine the representations of borders within the Border Force Museum, this article proceeds as follows: first, I address the performance qualities of international borders, with particular attention paid to the heightened theatricality that is employed at border control sites. Following this, I examine parallel performance elements common to museum exhibits, discussing the specific characteristics of the Border Force National Museum that mirror the theatricality of border control in the outside world. The latter part of this article turns to an alternative account of the Border Force Museum, developed through creative, performance autoethnographic writing. This section provides a theatrical representation of the author’s research experiences in the museum, which were impacted by a hybrid positionality that gave rise to conflicting feelings of belonging and exclusion. The article concludes with a summary of the insights raised by the performance autoethnographic methods, and suggests similar avenues of further research.

International Borders and Performance

² e.g., Silke Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jessica Aughter, ‘Border monuments: Memory, counter-memory, and (b)ordering practices along the US-Mexico border’, *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 291-311; Francesca Lanz, ‘Staging Migration (in) Museums: A Reflection on Exhibition Design Practices for the Representation of Migration in European Contemporary Museums’, *Museum and Society* 14, no. 1 (2017): 178-92; Philipp Marfleet, ‘Forgotten by History: Refugees, Historians, and Museums in Britain’, in *Global Mobilities: Refugees, Exiles and Immigrants in Museums and Archives*, ed. Amy K. Levin (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 73-86.

³ ‘Our Museums’, International Association of Customs Museums. Available at: <https://www.customsmuseums.org/our-museums/>. Last accessed May 28, 2020.

⁴ The museum receives £250,000 annually from the UK Home Office. See National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, *National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20*. HC 888. (London: National Archives, 2020). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/937929/National_Museums_Liverpool_-_Annual_Report_and_Accounts_2019-20.pdf. Last accessed 21 June, 2021.

International borders and museums are both constituted through performance, a broad term which covers a range of interactive phenomena from ritual and social performance to staged theatrical events. Over the past two decades, IR scholars have increasingly recognised the value of performance as a theoretical lens that elucidates the ways that political phenomena are saturated with aspects of interactive display and reception.⁵ Performance has been brought into IR frames from a number of influential angles, ranging from Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, to Victor Turner and Richard Schechner's theatre-anthropology collaborations, to Judith Butler's accounts of performativity and potentially subversive performance acts.⁶ At present a growing number of researchers are making use of their own performance practices to gain new insights about international politics.⁷

Given the rich and varied ways that performance can be used as a window onto the international, it is clear that a performance-informed analysis can bring nuance to our understanding of borders as sites that are socially constructed and enacted. A number of scholars working at the intersections of performance and politics have examined the social performances that frame the negotiation of behaviours and identities at border sites.⁸ However, for the purpose of this article I am primarily interested in an understanding of 'performance' that re-centres the creative, artistic aspects of performing. This might be helpful, I suggest, in placing a greater emphasis on the experiential qualities of live, ephemeral, interactive events.

Consequently, I am suggesting that significant insights can be obtained by considering the *theatricality* of border crossing. Theatricality is a capacious and contested term, but for the purposes of this article it can be understood as a heightened mode of performance that is distinct from the everyday. Performances that are theatrical are those that call attention to their own crafting, often through the strategic and selective use of lighting, scenography, scripted roles, and the control of bodies within the performance space.⁹ These elements

⁵ See, for example, Jenny Edkins and Adrian Kear, eds., *International Politics and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Shirin Rai and Janelle Reinelt, eds., *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014); Christine Sylvester, 'Dramaturgies of Violence', *Borderlands e-Journal* 2, no. 2 (2003).

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959); Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

⁷ e.g., Catherine Charrett, 'Diplomacy in Drag and Queer IR Art', *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 2 (2019): 280-99; Susanna Hast, 'Synching the Martial Body: poetic encounters with Finnish cadets', *Critical Military Studies* (2020).

⁸ Nancy A. Wonders, 'Global flows, Semi-permeable Borders and New Channels of Inequality: border crossers and border performativity', in *Borders, mobility and technologies of control*, eds. Sharon Pickering and Leanne Weber (Amsterdam: Springer, 2006), 63-86; Mark Salter, 'Places everyone! Studying the performativity of the border', *Political Geography* 30, no. 2 (2011): 66-67.

⁹ Janelle Reinelt, 'The Politics of Discourse: Performativity meets Theatricality', *SubStance* 31, no. 2/3 (2002): 206.

signal the extraordinary nature of the event, and participants are called upon to sustain the theatrical frame as both actors and spectators.

This kind of theatricality is evident at the border in the heightened characterisation of border agents, the choreography of arrivals and departures, scripted interrogations, and the vivid scenography of border control; and these theatrical elements combine to conjure particular modes of performance from everyone present at the border. Fundamentally, the theatricality of border control checkpoints delimits the ways that people can or must present themselves if they are to cross without difficulty. Borders separate people into those who belong inside and those who do not. They function as sites where difference – calculated via markers of race, ethnicity, disability, gender, and other features – is scrutinised and evaluated as a means of separating insiders from outsiders; valuable and productive citizens from different and risky others.¹⁰ The stakes are therefore higher, and the performances are more theatrical than everyday experience.

As Sophie Nield suggests, people who cross through border control checkpoints are called upon to perform a heightened version of a character proscribed by political, legal and cultural scripts. When people present themselves at border control sites, they embody their authentic selves, but they simultaneously endeavour to depict the character they wish authorities to believe in.¹¹ The overlap between these two presences, or the degree of artifice employed, varies from person to person. For those whose permission to enter might be called into question, this experience is often unpleasant, marked by a level of stress and fear equivalent to the precarity of their circumstances. In contrast though, Rachel Hall tells us that the scripted performances at borders are often enjoyed by some travellers, who enthusiastically embrace their role in security rituals as markers of their social status.¹² Thus, the performances of border crossing are enacted differently depending on one's position in society, and this suggests that cultural products about borders, such as museums, are also likely to be interpreted differently based on those varying positions.

We can gain further insights into the implications of these performances by considering what might be referred to as spectatorship – that is, as much as people represent particular characters at the border, they are also involved in the business of watching and interpreting the theatrical representations of others. Louise Amoore and Alexandra Hall note that the border is theatrical because it is: “[...] a space configured as theatre in which appearance, and identity, is *always in question* [emphasis added].¹³ Mark Salter affirms this view,

¹⁰ See, for example, Charlotte Epstein, ‘Guilty Bodies, Productive Bodies, Destructive Bodies: Crossing the Biometric Borders’, *International Political Sociology* 1, no. 2 (2007): 149-164; Alpa Parmar, ‘Borders as Mirrors: Racial Hierarchies and Policing Migration’, *Critical Criminology* 28 (2020): 175-192; Joseph Pugliese, *Bodies, Technologies, Biopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹¹ Sophie Nield, ‘On the Border as Theatrical Space’, in *Contemporary Theatres in Europe: a Critical Companion*, eds. Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 61-72.

¹²Rachel Hall, *The Transparent Traveler* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹³Louise Amoore and Alexandra Hall, ‘Border theatre: on the Arts of Security and Resistance’, *Cultural Geographies* 17, no. 3 (2010): 304.

describing border crossings as moments of crisis in which sovereign authority and individual citizenship status are tangled up in performance. At border crossings we inspect and interrogate, looking for the actor who is not quite true to the character he or she seeks to present.¹⁴ The overriding objective is a taxonomic sorting of border-crossers according to standards of productivity, risk, and cultural belonging. As such, border control officers, security staff, and fellow passengers all take up the role of theatre critic to varying degrees.

Combined with Nield's observation about the uniqueness of representations at the border, this attitude of scrutiny renders the border distinctly theatrical. This point is given added weight by the fact that the theatricality of the border is an embodied sensory experience. We experience, for example, the haptic nature of fingerprint scanning; our bodies stand uncomfortably in queues while observing others in their hushed interviews with border guards; or we feel the tension and anxiety of the border in our internal organs as we clutch the sharp-edged card that contains our biometric data. For people who have crossed borders feeling confident of their success, the experience of this scrutinising environment is one which reaffirms their position in a social and political hierarchy. Much the opposite is true for those who have crossed the border with the knowledge of possible failure colouring their experience throughout – for these travellers, scrutiny *feels* different. Whichever the case, the theatricality of the border has a heightened affective impact. Furthermore, our roles as both actors and spectators at the border are marked by an embodied theatricality, which leaves us with physical memories that might come into play when viewing the exhibits in the Border Force Museum.

Performance and Theatricality in the Border Force National Museum

The performances that create and shape borders also make their way into museum-based depictions of those borders. The scenography, characterisations, scripts and modes of spectatorship that appear at real-life borders will inevitably seep into museum exhibits *about* borders. However, museums in general also possess underlying qualities of performance that shape their social and cultural function and inform public interpretations of their contents. We can therefore consider the Border Force Museum as an institution that creatively performs itself while showcasing representations of national borders which have themselves been constructed through performance. These overlapping layers can be better understood by considering the ways that we experience all museums through performance.

In the first instance, the exhibition of artefacts rests on performance practices. Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblet notes that the process of selecting, curating, and displaying objects is bound up with performance – in order to qualify as an 'artefact' worthy of exhibit, there must first be a process of excavation from the object's ordinary surroundings, and an identification of its precise significance. These qualities must be signalled to future observers, and so the entire practice of museum exhibition hinges on performatively representing the processes of

¹⁴Mark Salter, 'When the Exception Becomes the Rule: Borders, Sovereignty, and Citizenship', *Citizenship Studies* 12, no. 4 (2008): 365-380.

discovery and extraction concurrent with the display of artefacts that result.¹⁵ This is evident within the Border Force museum, where many of the objects on display are ordinary, everyday items – for example, mobile phones, items of clothing, and fashionable children’s toys. In order to sustain the characterisation of these items as border-related artefacts, the museum uses explanatory panels, role-playing workshops and interactive games that link these objects to border security.

Whilst the process of creating artefacts is itself a performance, we can also consider the theatricality of the spaces that those artefacts are eventually housed within. Museums have long incorporated hidden scripts, lighting, and the staging of objects,¹⁶ which combine to determine the order in which visitors will encounter objects, and the pace at which they move through a gallery. This results in specific proprioceptive positioning, through which visitors physically orient themselves in relation to displayed objects.¹⁷ Barbara Montero suggests that proprioceptive interpretations contribute significantly to beliefs about the value or import of the encountered object.¹⁸ As a result, the scenographic control of bodies in the museum space is a crucial factor in the collective creation of meaning.¹⁹

To understand this further, the Border Force Museum’s unique features are illustrative. Much of the museum’s impact is derived from its range of interactive, family-friendly displays and events. For example, before entering the museum, visitors (especially children) are invited to follow "Matt's Trail". This is a game facilitated by a colourful, interactive handout that introduces Matt, a cartoon customs officer. Matt is depicted as a man with pale skin and floppy blond hair, his wide grin lending him a naïve and guileless air. His image is hidden in multiple locations within the museum exhibits – the handout's instructions challenge the child to find the hidden ‘Matt’ in each case, thus becoming adept at looking for what might be lurking beyond the surfaces of the displays. Other games, suitable for visitors of all ages, are interspersed throughout the museum: For example, an interactive game called ‘Spot the Smuggler’ asks participants to look at images of five passengers arriving at border control checkpoints, and challenges them to identify which of the depicted bodies poses a threat to UK security; Further along, visitors can imagine themselves as the operators of security scanners, looking at images of the contents of suitcases, searching for signs of illegality, all before the game’s timer counts down to implied, imaginary disaster.

¹⁵ Barbara Kirshenblatt Gimblet, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Valerie Casey, ‘Staging Meaning: Performance in the Modern Museum’, *TDR* 49, no. 3 (2005): 78-95.

¹⁷ Helen Rees Leahy ‘Watching Me, Watching You: Performance and Performativity in the Museum’, in *Performing Heritage*, eds. Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd (Manchester University Press, 2011), 26-38.

¹⁸ Barbara Montero, ‘Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 2 (2006): 231-242.

¹⁹ Sandra. H. Dudley, ‘What’s in the Drawer? Surprise and Proprioceptivity in the Pitt Rivers Museum’, *The Senses and Society* 9, no. 3 (2015): 269-309.

The museum also offers “Home Office-approved” workshops for young people.²⁰ Some of these workshops are historical in nature, such as those dealing with historical weapons or searches conducted on historical ships. Others are more directly linked to present-day border security. For example, *Little Smugglebusters* allows children under the age of 7 to learn about the practices of searching travellers’ luggage for smuggled items (“The session includes time for free play, a suitcase search, make your own passport, role play and a song”);²¹ The workshops entitled *RUSH* and *Weapons Awareness* teach older children about the ways that illegal drugs and knife violence are facilitated by the objects brought across UK borders from the outside.²²

All of this adds up to a highly interactive environment, in which the displays and informational panels are supplemented by visitors’ active, embodied participation. In this sense, the Border Force museum clearly illustrates that interactivity in museum spaces does not necessarily lead to a dialogic mode of interpretation. Although it is always possible for museum visitors to resist the meanings prescribed by exhibits,²³ the Border Force Museum strongly encourages a particular interpretation. This comes about in part because the playful, hands-on activities encourage role play in which visitors imagine themselves as border control officers – but never as would-be border-crossers. Visitors thus encounter the objects on display not solely through the lens of their own experiences, but through their imagined perspective as powerful officials charged with protecting national security. This positions visitors as suspect scrutinisers of others, replicating the environment of scrutiny and separation that exists at international borders.

Significantly, the exhibits that detail the potential threat posed by smuggled goods are placed side by side with other exhibits that depict the threat posed by immigrants –images of ship passengers riddled with smallpox, or video testimony from former border control officers who speak about their duty to ensure the validity of immigration claims. The museum itself is located within the same building that houses the International Slavery Museum. The vast majority of visitors to the Border Force exhibits have already encountered the material presented in the other galleries in which bodies are consistently highlighted for their otherness and objectification. Upstairs, visitors view images and objects that represent the historical degradation of Africans into income-generating property. Downstairs, those same visitors encounter displays that represent migrants as potential smugglers or harbourers of economic and security threats.

²⁰ ‘Venues. Workshops’, Liverpool Museums. Available at: <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/schools-and-groups/venues/seized.aspx>. Last accessed October 4, 2019.

²¹ ‘Little Smugglebusters’, Liverpool Museums. Available at: <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/schools-and-groups/workshops/little-smugglebusters.aspx>. Last , accessed October 4, 2019.

²² ‘Rush’, Liverpool Museums. Available at : <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/schools-and-groups/workshops/rush.aspx>. Last accessed October 4, 2019.

²³Irit Rogoff, ‘Looking Away’ in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 117-134.

Given this juxtaposition, it is my contention that the heightened theatricality of the Border Force museum renders it a significant producer of raced, gendered, and enabled citizenship. This is because visitors are encouraged to look upon the bodies of would-be border-crossers in the same way that they look upon items of luggage or cargo, scrutinising them for their value or threat to the already-insiders within UK borders. Furthermore, they experience the museum through embodied role play that has the potential to call upon the physical memories established from visitors' prior experiences at border control sites. This is not to suggest that every visitor experiences the Border Force Museum in the same way, but rather that the museum exhibits are staged with a particular kind of spectatorship in mind. As a result, the Border Force museum reflects and accentuates the border's role in scrutinising and separating bodies into insiders and outsiders.

Performance Autoethnography

Turning now to the research process undertaken within the museum, this section outlines the features of performance autoethnography that render it particularly generative of new knowledge about the theatricality of border crossing. Performance autoethnography is a well-established research method that has much in common with other reflexive and sensory-oriented ethnographic approaches.²⁴ Like sensory autoethnography, it highlights sensorial elements of the research experience, including embodied perceptions of breath, movement, tactility and interaction. These methods naturally take account of the researcher's own presence, using one's embodied experience of interactions as a tool for data collection.²⁵ Mobilizing personal experience as a window into cultural phenomena, autoethnographic researchers have developed robust approaches to bring personal, often autobiographical observations into the frame of analysis and, to varying degrees, juxtapose these with the experiences of others.²⁶

However, performance ethnography is ultimately distinct from other methods due to its connection to the fields of theatre and performance and its subsequent emphasis on exploring, documenting and showcasing multiple viewpoints through theatrical processes. A key point

²⁴ e.g., Roland Bleiker, 'Pluralist Methods for Visual Global Politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 3 (2015): 872-890; Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker, 'Autoethnographic International Relations: Exploring the Self as a Source of Research', *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010): 779-98; Carolyn Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004); Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2015); Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

²⁵ Tami Spry, 'Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis', *Qualitative Inquiry* 7, no. 6 (2001): 706-32.

²⁶ Including, *inter alia*, Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Politics of Exile* (London: Routledge, 2013); Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Autoethnography – Making Human Connections', *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 04 (2010): 1047-50; Oded Lowenheim, 'The "I" in IR: An Autoethnographic Account', *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 04 (2010): 1023-1045; Reeves, 'Auto-Ethnography and the Study of Affect'.

of all *performance* ethnographic methods is the centrality of creatively-worked performance practices that aim to elicit new perspectives on collected data. Through theatrical modes of documentation and presentation to others, the performance ethnographer situates the representation of data into a collective environment for knowledge generation. This might take the form of ethnodrama or ethnographic theatre, for example, but it might equally occur through applied theatre workshops that offer a more participatory negotiation of the material.²⁷ This enables groups of people from multiple backgrounds to interactively engage with the research data, to imagine the experience of others, and to contribute to the production of knowledge derived from the research process.²⁸

My own performance-based research methods were based on three decades of experience as an actor and theatre practitioner. This background has honed my sensitivity to collectively-experienced affect, as well as enabling a sharp awareness of my physical relationship to others in the spaces we co-occupy. I habitually take note of the rhythm and tempo of movements in public spaces, the choreographic arrangement of bodies, and the performance tactics through which social characters are enacted, rejected or altered. These sensitivities combine with my intellectual predilections as an IR researcher and shape my understanding of personal experience as it interacts with institutional power.

The performance methods that I undertook within the museum enabled me to consciously imagine and enact a variety of character positions. In the process it became clear that my personal recollections of border control were suffusing my perception of the exhibits. My own personal experiences with British borders - as a non-citizen and migrant living under the 'Hostile Environment' - seeped into my consciousness at every turn and coloured my responses to the exhibits. The 'Hostile Environment' refers to a set of policies that aim to make everyday life extremely difficult for illegal immigrants in the UK. For individuals who are unable to demonstrate their current legal immigration status, these policies make it difficult to access NHS services, rent accommodation, enrol in educational programmes, or seek employment. While such policies are aimed at tackling illegal immigration, they have widely impacted legal immigrants as well as UK citizens – my own family not excepted.²⁹

Crucially, the Hostile Environment impacts the way that individuals experience border control sites, as it raises the stakes of the performances that must occur there. While this strongly influenced my experience within the Border Force Museum, I was also consistently aware of the ways that the exhibits called to mind a sense of cultural belonging, through my associations with family members and moments from my past. In the museum I felt a stark sense of being *both* insider *and* outsider, embodying two identity positions at once. Faced

²⁷ Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Abingdon: Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 269.

²⁸ Bryant Alexander, 'Performance Ethnography: The Reenacting and Inciting of Culture', *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 411-443.

²⁹ Amreen Qureshi, Marley Morris, and Lucy Mort, *Access Denied: The Human Impact of the Hostile Environment* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2020).

with subject matter that unexpectedly brought up deeply personal memories and emotions, I began to realise that by embracing my own personal experiences in the museum I might obtain greater insights into its relationship with the theatricality of material borders.

Given this context, performance autoethnography became even more valuable as a tool that would allow me to account for the complex and contradictory responses I experienced within the museum. This value is supported by scholars who suggest that autoethnography can be especially productive when undertaken by researchers who occupy marginalised or liminal positions in relation to their area of study.³⁰ The fact of being a political interloper in the crowd can position the individual as the lone audience member who laughs when they should be crying, or who leaves the auditorium perplexed when everyone else is raving. The unconscious departure from the interpretations of the crowd can make otherwise unnoticed features apparent. It follows then that performance autoethnographers working amongst the borderlands of political and cultural identities possess unique avenues of perception that enhance their ability to imaginatively embody and interrogate the complexities of live events and practices.

Performance autoethnography also draws upon what Norman K. Denzin refers to as “the sting of memory”³¹ that occurs during research. It “[...] focuses on those moments, epiphanies in a person’s life that define a crisis, a turning point that connects a personal trouble, a personal biography, with larger social, public issues.”³² Tami Spry notes a shift from participant-observer to a research process that involves the production of creative work as an effect of “the fragments and wreckage of experience”, which is then opened up to the participation and engagement of others with the aim of transforming systems of dominance.³³ In this way, performance autoethnographers deliberately transform their recollections of personal experience into creative representations that are put into wider circulation through theatrical writing or performance. The theatricality of performance autoethnography enables the researcher to selectively and creatively bring into being a representation of research data that is consciously informed by personal crisis or trauma, putting this into dialogue with representations of identities that are produced by frameworks of state and institutional power.

It is this approach that I embraced in my exploration of the Border Force Museum. I visited the museum on five separate occasions between January 2019 and October 2020, seeking to understand the exhibits through the lens of my own personal experience. I made notes during and shortly after my visits, often characterised by creative, theatrical writing, reflecting my

³⁰ Melissa Hauber-Özer, ‘Yabancı: an Autoethnography of Migration’, *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 20, no. 3 (2019); Stacy Holman Jones, ‘Living Bodies of Thought: The “Critical” in Critical Autoethnography’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (2016): 228-237; Sarah Naumes, ‘Is All “I” IR?’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 3 (2015): 820-832.

³¹ Denzin, *Performance Autoethnography*, 9.

³² Denzin, *Performance Autoethnography*, 22.

³³ Tami Spry, ‘A Performative-I Co-Presence: Embodying the Ethnographic Turn in Performance and the Performative Turn in Ethnography’, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2006): 339-346.

observations of the exhibits, my physical and emotional responses, and associations I made with other personal experiences. In addition to written notes, my documentation also included items such as scenographic diagrams, character vignettes and theatrical auto-writing. Throughout my visits, and my reflections after them, I paid close attention to my own physicality - my breathing patterns, proprioception, visceral reactions, and my physical proximity to other people. Out of these engagements, imagined performances took shape. Characters I had thought incidental walk-ons crept onto the pages in front of me to steal the spotlight from others; moods appeared all around me in the form of imagined light, shadows, colours, and rhythms. This process provided the means to dynamically apprehend, document, and communicate the complexities of the Border Force Museum, and its relationship to UK borders.

A Performance Autoethnography of the Border Force National Museum

In this section of the article I deliberately break with the norms of academic writing in favour of the autoethnographic. Scholars who employ such methods often write about the discomfiture they experience while doing so,³⁴ and my own experience bears this out. Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate the potential for such methods to reveal the theatrical workings of museum spaces. More specifically, I aim to highlight the elucidatory potential contained in the experiences of visitors who locate themselves in-between or on the fringes of the identities represented in the gallery. In the passages below I make use of three types of writing: first, general descriptions of the museum and its artefacts, written in standard typeface. These are followed by italicised accounts of my personal experience of the museum, with an emphasis on my physical reactions; these sections are based on a synthesis of the notes and reflective writing I produced within the museum and shortly after my visits. Finally, I depict the strong associations that I made with past events or people in my life, which came to my mind when viewing the exhibits – these are written as theatrical scripts, which the reader should imagine appearing hologram-like in the midst of the museum.

First, a short autobiography: I am, in most contexts, a moderately privileged person. I'm a white, English-speaking, North American citizen. I'm also a migrant who underwent a fully immersive experience of the UK Hostile Environment. I haven't encountered the hardships and traumas faced by people displaced from homelands, forced to travel unimaginable distances to unfamiliar places to seek safety and a future for their loved ones. But I'm also not the kind of migrant who is only theoretically aware of the hardships and traumas that can be faced by people who attempt to move around the globe. I am somewhere in between. I was not subjected to discrimination or marginalisation on the basis of race, ethnicity or nationality, which are compounded by hypervisibility; I did experience complications arising from disability, gender, and to some extent, class. My story, if I chose to tell it in full, would

³⁴ Oded Lowenheim, 'The "I" in IR: An Autoethnographic Account'; Amanda Russell-Beattie, 'The Reflexive Potential of Silence: Emotions, the "Everyday" and Ethical International Relations', *Journal of International Political Theory* 15, no. 2 (2019): 229-245.

be rife with unexpected twists and turns, and some degree of complacency or naïveté on the part of the central character.

But let me back up a bit. I was raised in a small, relatively homogeneous community but my upbringing included a good dose of British culture and customs thanks to the influence of my grandmother, a British war bride. My grandmother was a strong presence in my life, and enthusiastically taught me cockney rhyming slang and the recipe for the perfect plum pudding. Later, I moved to the UK as an undergraduate student, and eventually completed a PhD there. I fell in love with a British citizen, established a network of extended family and friends, and naively considered the UK to be my long-term home.

Enter the Immigration Bill of 2012 and the Hostile Environment policies. Whenever I tell my story to others, I am asked the same incredulous questions. My answers inevitably feel inadequate.

Yes, the government did change the immigration rules with very little warning, and many people fell through the cracks just as we did.

No, getting married wouldn't have helped.

No, we couldn't both move to another country.

No, I didn't have family who could help me.

Yes, it seems difficult for me to believe too.

For several years I picked my way through immigration regulations, attempting to find pathways that would allow me to live with my loved ones in the UK, some of whom depended on my care and could not relocate elsewhere. I hobbled from one fixed-term visa to the next, each costing many hundreds of pounds, counting down my time while worrying about the consequences for my family, if I was forced to leave. I experienced the reluctance of employers to grant interviews to people from non-EU countries; I was once told by a landlord that they don't let flats to 'foreigners'; I had one academic employer attempt to (illegally) revoke a job offer when they learned that I was on a fixed term visa; I had my biometric data recorded four, or maybe five times. International travel became something to be avoided at all costs, and when I did need to encounter border control it was always accompanied by a fear of the questions that would be asked, and in some cases my inability to produce the expected answers.

And so I began to understand something of the complex challenges faced by migrants, especially those who do not easily conform to the categories and characteristics proscribed by official policies. Throughout my experiences I have always remained conscious of the privilege that my particular background and circumstances conferred – my nationality, my skin colour, my profession. But my journey made me sensitive to the traumas and frustrations that are experienced by migrants more generally. I ask readers to join me now on a re-enactment of the Border Force Museum, in the hopes that I might share these sensitivities and convey a new understanding of museums and borders along the way.

On a cold day in late November I am walking out of Lime Street station and following the tourist signs that point the way to the Maritime Museum, where the Border Force Museum is located. The wind is biting cold, and rain pierces my skin through my clothes, stinging me with cold like tiny tacks flying through the air. The seagulls scream overhead and I briefly watch their slick passage through the air, envying, as I always do, the birds' ability to fly over the earth without noticing its human-imagined borderlines. Finally I reach the Maritime museum, and feel relief to be able to take shelter from the windy weather. I step through the glass doors and look about me to get my bearings. I take a breath and let the warmer air settle around me. I wipe wet strands of hair from where they cling to my face, and shake out my coat to rid it of water. My pace slows as I allow myself to catch my breath. And suddenly, there it is, clearly marked in yellow to the left – 'Seized! The Border and Customs Uncovered'. The font feels aggressive to me, large and stark against a bright background; but there is also an array of flyers and activity sheets aimed at young children – bright colours and cartoon characters jostle with the Seized graphics. The signs point me downstairs, and I dutifully descend, notebook in hand.

Descending the stairs to the basement, the visitor is immersed in darkness at the entrance to the museum. Once inside, the path is obvious. Visitors wend their way through a corridor-like space following arrows on the floor that show the prescribed order of the exhibits. The lighting is low, with small spotlights illuminating the objects within glass display cases. The first panels discuss taxation, illustrated by images of terraced houses.

I enter the main gallery, passing through a large doorway. There is an air of mystery here, conveyed by the low lights and the message written above the door: 'Enter a world where things are not what they seem'. I see floor-to-ceiling panels that show lines of typically-British terraced rooftops, with their characteristic slate tiles and ceramic chimney pots. I struggle to understand why they are here in the museum, and I enter the space with my head fixated on them while my body moves around it. The lights are dim here and my eyes need time to adjust. For a fleeting moment my mind makes a surreal association with the classic British soap opera, Coronation Street, and its iconic opening titles that feature terraced rooftops and a quintessential Northern British streetscape. I hear the theme tune in my mind, with its long, sliding cornet notes...

Scene 1: Coronation Street

The setting is a quintessential front room of a Northern English terraced house. A television sits in the corner beside a large window framing a streetscape through lace curtains. There is a battered sofa and armchair, a chunky television in the corner, and a gas fireplace against one wall. Books and magazines litter the floor, and other surfaces bear the marks of university student life – empty mugs, scattered clothing, photographs and posters on the walls. From offstage, the sounds of a bubbling kettle and spoons in coffee cups ring out over the noise of the television. ME, 18 enters from outside, slamming the door behind her.

ROSIE: (to ME, 18) Hey, just in time, the kettle's just boiled! You want coffee?

ME, 18: Oh, hi – can I have tea please?

SUNITA: How was the lecture?

ME, 18: [removing coat and scarf and tossing them on the arm of a chair] Ugh, yeah it was ok I guess. Well, actually no - I couldn't understand most of it.

SUNITA: Ha, that's me all the time! Can't make sense of half of it.

ROSIE: [teasingly] That's 'cause you never do the reading, lazy arse.

SUNITA: [laughing slyly] there's more important things in life, trust me.

ME, 18: [sighing] Well, in my case I just couldn't understand the guy at all – I mean his accent. It was like he was underwater or something. I honestly couldn't make out half of it!

SUNITA: Where was he from??

ME, 18: I have no idea... maybe Jupiter. But probably Yorkshire somewhere I guess.

ROSIE: Ah, never mind, you're home now. Hey Sunny, flip the channel over – *Coronation Street's* starting.

SUNITA: [picking up the remote control and changing the channel to ITV]. Oh yeah!... god do you think Raquel is really leaving Curly?! He's such a nice bloke. Deserves a lot better than that slag.

ROSIE: [over her shoulder, exiting stage left] Nah, she should've chucked 'im ages ago! I'll finish the brews, tell me what I miss.

[Sunita changes the channel, then flops down again in the armchair. ME, 18 moves to the fireplace and turns up the dial, sending the flames shooting higher; then curls up on the corner of the sofa with her feet under her. The Coronation Street theme tune fills the sitting room, as the telly tinges their faces with blue light. They sit riveted.]

SUNITA: [turning to ME, 18] Hey, look, never mind about the lecture – me an' Rosie are going to the chippie for our tea – you want to come with?

[the lights dim as a spot comes up on ME, 18]

ME, 18: [Aside] This was my first home that wasn't my parents' house. The place where I started to think that tea and telly with friends could soothe pretty much any problem.

END SCENE.

I pause. A hesitant step forward makes me aware that the street scene images are lenticular – they shift as you pass by, and morph into something else. What were family homes are now x-rays of dangerous items hidden in everyday objects. I feel a bemused scowl creep between my eyes and my mouth twists with a vague cynicism. My reverie of safe, cosy homelife has been entirely supplanted by this new imagery. My analytical brain asserts itself, observing that none of the other museum visitors are spending much time here, and perhaps I should take a cue from them.

The museum opens into a long, narrow gallery lined by display cases interspersed with interpretive panels. I move to the back wall first, perusing historical objects that represent

anti-smuggling efforts of past centuries – spirit strength gauges, customs house strong boxes, models of historical enforcement ships, and other tools and documents.

I'm looking now at ancient weights and measurements, models of ships, and tools that the text tells me are for probing things to verify their value. The objects behind glass are made of pleasing materials, wood and brass and leather and velveteen. I can imagine picking them up, feeling their weight in the palm of my hand, the smooth surface of the wood polished by decades of touch. This is a pleasurable display, one that activates my senses – I move slowly, embodying the sense of the serious and the reverential here. I imagine the smell of old leather and the sea, the gliding movements of well-kept gauges. Sometimes there is a glare on the glass that blocks my view. I lean slightly this way or that, in or out, stretching up or down to set my eyes unobscured on the objects I'm being shown. As I do so, my peripheral vision is activated, and I become vaguely aware of the graphics that frame the bottom of the cases.

The graphics that frame the glass exhibit cases are markedly different to the historical objects on display. They are single words painted in big black letters against a bright yellow background, reminiscent of emergency crime scene tape. The words scroll across one's vision as visitors move through the museum: Hidden... Guarding... Waiting... Protecting... Secure... Control... Duty... Power... Calculate... Measure... Chase... Arrest.

The words gradually register in my consciousness - the graphics jar, with their bright hi-viz colours and something in the font that suggests modern technology. They disturb the pleasure I was deriving from the burnished brass and dark wood surfaces of the historical objects. 'Hidden – Guarding – Watching – Protected'. I'm scribbling the words down in my notebook, but I'm also aware of the physical reaction I'm experiencing. I take a step back from the display cases, and I'm now observing the museum space as a whole. Unexpectedly, the area between my shoulder blades tingles, my breath has lost its fluidity and it becomes something I need to think to do. My diaphragm feels taut. My left hand rubs the bridge of my nose and briefly passes across my eyes. I have to will myself to look up again and focus on the artefacts. I breathe as deep as I can to stem the slight feeling of fear that is edging around my upper digestive tract. I move forward with quick steps, speeding up my progress through the museum.

As I move on, I become aware of a faint soundtrack in the background, barely discernible at first. There are voices and staccato noises, and the first time I visit I find myself following my ears to track down the source of the sound and make sense of it. After some time it becomes clear that it emanates from a display about the heroic sacrifice of the historical men and women who have guarded British borders.

The sounds prod their way into my consciousness and shift my focus of attention. The main part of the gallery seems to lead ahead and to my left, but the sound draws me over to the corner on the right. The first thing I can make out is the whir of helicopters, and masculine voices shouting words of war, like 'incoming!...take cover!'. This fades into static-filled radio transmissions, then the ringing clash of sword blades. I try to think of an explanation for this, to give it a coherent meaning or significance. I focus my eyes for quite a long time on the panels in front of me that show heroic images, both historical and contemporary. But my thoughts are interrupted – above the din of the war soundtrack, I can hear, as clear as a bell, the distinct timbre of my Grandmother's voice, complete with the vestiges of her East London accent.

Scene 2: The Interview

ME, AGE 10: [phone receiver to her ear, twisting the long cord around and around with excitement] Hi Grammy, it's me. [...] Umm, can I ask you something? I have to do a report for school and we're supposed to interview a relative and ask them about what they did in a war. Is it ok if I interview YOU? Can I come over tomorrow?

[Cut to scene of ME, AGE10 ensconced on a flowered sofa in a comfortable family house. Doilies, ashtrays, and candy dishes cover the coffee table. GWENDOLYN, 1986 sits knitting at the other end of the sofa. The needles emit rapid clicks and metallic slides throughout the scene].

GWENDOLYN, 1986: [Giggling slightly under her breath] You know love, I might not be the right person to talk to about this - are you sure it's ok if you write about someone who was in the *British* army?

ME, AGE 10: Well, yeah I think it's fine, I don't see why it wouldn't be – and anyway it's really cool that you're from England and everything. Everyone else's family is just from around here.

GWENDOLYN, 1986: Oh, alright then... [explaining slowly and patiently] Well, in World War II I was drafted into the British Army. I was an Ack-Ack girl.

ME, AGE 10: [Pause.] A what? Ackack... what's that?

GWENDOLYN, 1986: [with laughter in her voice] Ack-Ack, love. It means anti-aircraft, like the letters, A-A-. We watched for German planes and told the men on the guns how to aim and fire at them.

ME, AGE 10: Oh ok, I get it... But wow, I didn't know you actually used guns and stuff!... I mean I thought you were a nurse or something. Weren't you scared?

GWENDOLYN, 1986: [Pausing from her knitting, looking directly at the girl over her glasses] Oh yes, they were very big guns, and powerful too. And I guess we probably were scared sometimes. [She tilts her head back and her gaze shifts toward the ceiling] But I don't really remember that... I know people talk about being scared and brave and all of that, but really, in those days they just told us what to do and we had to do it. [chuckling, she resumes her knitting, more slowly now] You know, the whole time everything was so new to me. I'd never left home before, it was a whole new world. That's what I remember most. Sometimes we went out dancing. I remember being *really* scared about getting the dance steps right. And that's where I met your grandfather. He asked me to dance. We were leaving the dance hall, my friend and me, and suddenly I heard this American accent shout out, 'Hey red'!

END SCENE.

Back in the museum now. The many stories my grandmother told me of laughter, homesickness, insecurities, camaraderie and wartime coming of age don't fit with this exhibit's sounds of violent border keeping. It was a different kind of battle then I guess. I notice that the sensations in my body have changed dramatically as my mind has turned to memories of my Grandmother. I'm no longer feeling anxious or tense. A sigh moves through me, not unpleasant – it's the bittersweet and warming sensation of nostalgia, along with a strong feeling of pride that sits across the top of my shoulders. I imagine my grandmother's bravery as she loaded anti-aircraft guns and tried out new dance steps. A smile spreads across my face, which I share with other museum visitors as I walk away from this exhibit. A corner of my mind registers the suspicion that the museum's representations of militarism have done their job – I am suffused with a feeling of connection to family members of wartimes past.

Feeling more at ease within myself, I come next to an exhibit of everyday objects that have either been used to conceal illicit goods, or are counterfeits masquerading as sought-after commercial brands. These include household items, personal accessories, toys, books, sporting goods, and clothing. Many of these objects are imitations of luxury branded products, and the interpretive notes suggest the dangers presented by shoddily-manufactured knock-offs. The brand names are prominently displayed, perhaps prompting associations with visitors' own possessions or desired purchases. It is a garish scene, with an overabundance of bright colours and eye-catching logos.

I start to hurry past this display. It doesn't hold my interest but I linger long enough to question why that might be. Looking closer my initial impressions are confirmed; the vast majority of the items in this case are luxury goods; names like Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Lacoste, and iPhone blur together in the cluttered array of products. A young couple and their two toddlers are absorbed in examining the items – the man is pointing something out to a small girl in his arms and all of them lean in for a closer look. I move around them, not really caring which brands are on show. I feel disconnected from the items, and also from the people looking at them.

Scene 3: Emptiness

The lights fade up on a scene of a worker in an academic office, ME, RECENT PAST at a desk, hunched over a desktop PC. Enter COLLEAGUE 1 and COLLEAGUE 2, chatting to each other animatedly. They break off as they realise someone is in the room.

COLLEAGUE 1: [smiling, friendly] Oh hey! – we're just about to go to Costa for lunch. Do you want to come?

ME, RECENT PAST: Oh... uh, sorry no. I'm *really* swamped here. I'd better stay and catch up on things. Have a nice lunch though! [COLLEAGUE 1 shrugs and exits with COLLEAGUE 2, resuming their chat. ME, RECENT PAST watches them go, then sighs and puts head down on the desk.]

ME, RECENT PAST: [Voiceover] I want to go with them of course. It's a new job and I don't want people to think I'm unfriendly. Lunch would be amazing, but Costa is expensive. [Long pause] My visa says 'No Recourse to Public Funds'. I've just started my latest academic gig but won't get paid for another 4 weeks. I am ineligible for loans or credit cards until I can show proof of indefinite leave to remain. I haven't eaten breakfast today. In my bag I have an apple and three plain crackers. This and a large bottle of water will keep me going until this evening, when I will measure out a cautious portion of rice or noodles. This strategy will get me through to payday, and I remind myself each day that I am lucky. But I do wish I could get to know my colleagues over lunch.

END SCENE.

I walk away from the counterfeit brands display. My head is lower. I struggle to swallow and my tongue presses hard against the roof of my mouth. There are other memories that threaten to surface here, of money borrowed, debts accrued... I press them back down inside of me and walk on. I feel as though my body is curling in upon itself, condensing into a small hard knot that wants no contact with the outside world. Another museum visitor looks at me strangely and I realise my mouth is set in an unattractive frown. I try to compose myself to appear more normal. I walk quickly past the next few display cases.

As visitors progress through the museum, interactive games repeatedly catch one's attention. Players are challenged to complete a range of tasks, from navigating a Border Patrol boat through dangerous waters to spotting the hidden threats lurking in travellers' x-rayed luggage. One of the most vivid games is called 'Spot the Smuggler'. This game is introduced by an informational panel that discusses the problem of smuggling through British airports, entitled 'the Art of Distraction':

Concealment is about the art of distraction and looking completely innocent. Smugglers do everything to divert attention away from themselves. To try and identify them, officers use 'profiling' to pick out possible suspects. They look at where travellers have come from, who they are with and how they have paid for their tickets. However, they only have seconds to decide whether to stop someone.³⁵

This panel is illustrated by a photograph that shows an airport arrivals hall, populated by a diverse range of people; there are dark skinned travellers at its centre. Immediately adjacent to this is an interactive game that invites visitors to examine images of five different people to determine which ones are smugglers.

³⁵ Informational panel in the Seized! Gallery, International Maritime Museum, Liverpool, UK. Photographed by the author on 29 January, 2020.

As I walk through the museum it grows more crowded. Some displays are blocked by other visitors; as I move around them my attention is caught by the energetic movements of a boy of 8 or 9 who is absorbed in an interactive game a few meters away from me – I can't make out the details from here, but I note flashing red lights and a large countdown timer. I watch the boy try to work out the rules of the game and the operations of the various buttons. An older woman, perhaps his grandmother, stands nearby looking onward to other parts of the museum. The boy becomes frustrated with the game and tries to push all the buttons at once, before being led away. I take his place. There in front of me is a large panel showing five bodies. I quickly register that there seems to be no racial diversity here – the pale skin tone of each body is identical, and given greater prominence by the fact that the photos seem to have been deliberately desaturated – the images are vaguely ghost-like, as if these bodies were never quite real. They include various genders and ages, and one of them, I note with trepidation, is in a wheelchair. I read the instructions and learn that I must identify which of the bodies is dangerous and should be denied entry. I play the game several times, experiencing growing tension as the timer counts down before I quite have a chance to make my selections. It is mildly adrenaline-inducing. I play long enough to learn that each of the people depicted can be guilty in any given cycle of the game. The elderly man carrying the Persian rug is using it to hide illegal objects. The man in the wheelchair isn't really disabled, his chair is hollowed out to smuggle drugs. I begin to ponder the ways that security is inscribed on bodies here, and the way that this is framed as entertainment... but I slowly become more and more puzzled by the apparent whiteness of the five characters within the game. I wonder if anyone else notices this. My thoughts are interrupted as I am jostled from my left; I am hogging the game – there are young children waiting to play and I've been ignoring them.

SCENE 4: The Family Dinner

The setting is a rectangular dining table covered with empty serving dishes; the meal is coming to an end. Several family members and close friends lounge around the table, their plates pushed back away from them. Someone stands up to dole out the last dregs of wine into everyone's glasses.

FAMILY FRIEND, 2012: Well if you ask me, the real problem in this country is all the immigrants.

[There are a few emphatic nods of agreement around the table, some crossed arms and murmurs of assent, and a couple of faces frozen in stunned silence.]

ME, 2012: [After a pause, shaking head.] Really? Did I really hear you say that? You do remember that *I'm* an immigrant, right?

FAMILY FRIEND, 2012: [snorting dismissively] Oh come on, you're not an immigrant. You're one of *us*. I'm talking about all these bastards who come here and live off our taxes and take over our towns – these bloody foreigners get a free council house just for asking and can't even be bothered to speak our language, or wear civilised clothes or even try to blend in. They're ruining this country I tell you!

ME, 2012: [Looking down at plate. Silence.]

[The complaints about immigrants grow as ME, 2012 quietly leaves the table and walks away, still not saying a word.]

END SCENE.

As I move aside from the Spot the Smuggler game, I feel confused. My forehead contracts and my brows draw together while my jaw juts forward. But I do not feel nauseous or anxious here. I feel a different sensation in my chest – my lungs expand, sending a forceful feeling outward from my ribcage that runs down my arms to my hands – I feel angry here, but also invigorated. Thinking on the injustice of the museum’s representations, I feel a desire to act. It’s an almost-pleasant feeling - energising and revitalising, and I feel considerably happier than in many other parts of the museum. I search for the reason why, and it is this – here, I feel do not feel fearful or personally unsafe, but rather empowered at the thought of confronting injustices done to others; I feel more myself. This is troubling in a different way, and the dynamising energy I had been feeling congeals into self-critical introspection. As I walk away I allow myself to wonder, is the object of the Spot the Smuggler game to figure out which of the bodies is not really white?

I linger now in front of another illustrative panel – one which held my attention repeatedly on each of my visits to the museum. It’s called ‘A Family’s Tax’ and it shows cartoon-like figures occupying various rooms of a family house. One character called ‘Dad’ is raising a glass of champagne and congratulating himself on a pay rise; an older woman, presumably the mother, is upstairs buying shoes online; a son is packing his suitcase in preparation for a holiday abroad; the daughter is downstairs getting ready to ask Dad to buy her some new clothes. I am still not entirely certain of the intended import of this panel, except that it shows the many areas of family life that should be subject to taxation. There is much that could be made of the gender normativity on display in this panel, but each time I begin to consider it I am overtaken by other associations; Each and every time I look at this panel I cannot dislodge my focus from that word, ‘family’.

First nausea so strong I feel I might genuinely vomit. After a couple of hard swallows comes a sadness so consuming I feel it oozing out of my pores and crawling across my skin. Pressure builds behind my eyes. I stand, transfixed, and lose track of the number of other visitors who pass me by.

SCENE 5: Family Life

The setting is the office of a recently-established Immigration Law Firm. The furnishings are sparse but are trying hard to convey seriousness and prestige. The carpets still smell of glue. Cards and thank-you notes from former clients, mostly containing pictures drawn by children, are decorating the shelves behind a glass desk. IMMIGRATION LAWYER sits behind an overly-tidy desk, his dark suit and garishly-cheerful tie hanging slightly uneasily on his lean frame. ME, BROKEN sits in the fake-leather-and-chrome seat opposite.

IMMIGRATION LAWYER: So you said the Family visa won’t work for you – are you sure?

ME, BROKEN: Well, yes, unfortunately that's not an option for us – there's the new income requirement for one thing, but there are other issues too.

IMMIGRATION LAWYER: Okaaay, so why can't you just extend your current leave?

ME, BROKEN: Well, I don't think I can because it says in the Guidance document that they've introduced a limit to the total length of stay.

IMMIGRATION LAWYER: [eyebrows raising] Oh, really? Where does it say that?

ME, BROKEN: Well, if you look at the document... I can send you the link if you need it.

IMMIGRATION LAWYER: No no, I can pull it up here. But I'm sure that's not a problem, I've never come across it. [He taps away at his keyboard and stares at the monitor on his desk].

ME, BROKEN: [brightening] Oh well, if it's not an issue than that's great! Maybe I misread it....

IMMIGRATION LAWYER: Um... [quietly, scowling]. Let me just check.

[Time passes as he scrolls through the document.]

IMMIGRATION LAWYER: Oh! Oh I see... no, I've never come across this before. Hmm. No it's very clear, you really won't qualify. Hmm! [His well-groomed eyebrows furrow].

ME, BROKEN: So, can you help me find some other options?

IMMIGRATION LAWYER: Well, ah, it really is a difficult case.... Um, it seems like there really isn't a viable option for you. [glibly] So my advice is that probably the best thing is to just go back home for now. They might let you apply again after a few years.

ME, BROKEN: [quietly] Right. Ok.... But this *is* my home. I haven't lived anywhere else for almost all of my adult life. And what about my partner? We can't both move abroad... it's complicated.

IMMIGRATION LAWYER: Well, there's nothing to stop you from visiting each other. Flights aren't as expensive as they used to be and there's always Skype. Look, a lot of families are doing this kind of thing. It usually works out in the end! [Smiling and nodding, encouragingly]

[The lights fade to a single spotlight on ME, BROKEN, numb and mute with shock and grief. Voices of other migrants separated from loved ones are heard in voiceover.]

MIGRANT 1: Everyone keeps asking me why we don't just get married – as if it's that easy! I think people just believe what they see in the films – you know, that old rom-com about people getting married for a visa and then realising they were in love all along. God, how I wish real life was like that.

MIGRANT 2: In the last three years, I've seen my partner twice: once for three months in the US, and once for about half an hour in an airport detention centre – I stupidly thought I'd be allowed into the UK on a tourist visa to see him for a short visit, but they didn't believe that I wouldn't overstay, so they refused to let me in.

MIGRANT 3: We Skype whenever we can, and we keep our relationship going that way. But it hurts so much to not be there for him in person when he needs a hug... not able to rub his shoulders after a hard day or squeeze his hand when we're out in public together – just those little reminders that you're there for each other. That can't happen online.

MIGRANT 4: Our son is two years old now, and he's only ever met his dad on Facetime. Don't these politicians have families? Aren't they human?

MIGRANT 5: All we wanted was a simple, quiet life together.

END SCENE.

The weight of this knowledge – my own memories and my memories of the stories told by others who have faced a similar fate - settles familiarly around my shoulders. I have indulged the presence of this knowledge so many times. This is not theoretical knowledge. It's physical. I continue to look on the happy family panel before me, feeling the burden of crisis all over again. Slowly, slowly I push away this memory as I look longer at the picture in front of me.

It's a stupid cartoon, I think.

There is one more scene that comes repeatedly to my mind now as I reflect back on my experiences in the museum; it is my happy ending. Although my personal experiences of the Hostile Environment were prolonged and traumatic, I was ultimately one of the lucky ones - in the nick of time, and unlike so many others. It is telling though, that this scene, the happy one, never once came to my mind while I was within the Border Force gallery. There is no place in the museum where this part of my story can be told.

--Curtain--

Conclusion

The theatrical account above is intended to creatively suggest a sense of the Border Force Museum's exhibits, and particularly the ways that they reflect the theatrical manifestation of real-world international border crossing. Although the performance autoethnography might stand alone as a dissemination of knowledge about the museum, in this concluding section I seek to highlight the unique benefits of performance autoethnography that were revealed through my research process. I then summarise the key points that these methods uncovered about the Border Force Museum, and ways that such approaches might be carried forward in future research.

Perhaps most significantly, this research reaffirmed the potential for performance autoethnography to provide a means of imaginatively occupying multiple subject positions during museum-based research. Because theatrical performance naturally provides a platform for multiple characterisations and duality of perspectives, it offers a medium for researchers to explore the complex and sometimes contradictory demands that museums place on visitors. In the same way that international borders are experienced differently depending upon one's citizenship status, a museum's content and layout also affect visitors in varying ways. By engaging in performance processes, researchers can creatively embody

differing perspectives and thus gain more nuanced understandings of the ways that visitors' experiences are shaped. In my case I made extensive use of my own sense of identification with a hybrid character, someone who is simultaneously the British insider and the suspect immigrant; but similar approaches might be taken up by researchers regardless of their own personal identities or subject positions.

Furthermore, performance autoethnography encourages researchers to physically embody the various affective dimensions that might be imagined for different characters. Performance is a process that implicates a researcher's entire body, and as a result the impact of a museum can be experienced in more physical and material ways than other methods might facilitate. What results is a different understanding of the role of affect within museum spaces. As we imaginatively embody characters in different scenarios, we are inevitably aware of the ways that our bodies encounter and react to phenomena. This gives rise to a more acute understanding of the relationship between the physical staging of exhibits and the affective elements of visitor interpretation – and in turn, this has great potential to cut through the institutional creations of meaning that otherwise drive our interpretation of spaces and events.

These points were borne out by the insights that my creative autoethnography revealed about the Border Force Museum. Fundamentally, the museum's artefacts are largely comprised of everyday objects and familiar cultural references – streetscapes, personal possessions, toys, food and drink, etc. My performance-based methods enabled me to understand how these objects are not simply mundane and commonplace; rather, they operate as powerful signals of identity and belonging which support the museum's messages about border security. When focusing on a character driven by an insider-identity, these objects gave rise to associations with family members or friends, and sometimes a sense of pride attached to a notion of shared cultural belonging. Conversely, when objects were approached through the character of the outsider-immigrant, they evoked a sense of distance from other museum visitors, predicated on feelings of exclusion.

Furthermore, the museum overall stresses the existence of security threats and positions border control as a vital protecting force. Throughout the museum, visitors are prompted to take up an attitude of scrutiny as the exhibits fluctuate between reminders of homelife and family to depictions of security threats, leading visitors to progress to each new display case with a heightened sense of suspicion. Notably, these depictions of risk are often paired with raced, gendered, and enabled imagery. When my performance methods concentrated on embodied memories of 'Britishness', I was only theoretically cognizant of these features. Conversely, when I focused on a character associated with my experiences of exclusion from British borders, I found that the themes of risk and scrutiny had a marked impact on my emotional responses. It became clear that for visitors who might feel alienated or excluded from the dominant 'insider' characters that the museum depicts, the only option is to imagine oneself as a target of border control investigations, fearful of one's ability to prove one's worth and thus be allowed 'inside'.

Overall then, the museum effectively separates bodies into those who rightfully belong inside British borders and those who must be excluded as threats to security and economic prosperity. This is achieved in part through emotionally-impactful visual imagery – but

significantly, the hierarchical sorting of insiders and outsiders is greatly aided by the role that physical stimuli play within the museum. Throughout my research, many of the exhibits I looked at were experienced as sensations on my skin, in my stomach, through my spine – regardless of which elements of my identity I was creatively evoking through my imagined performance. I concluded that this attention to physicality is produced through the museum’s unique combination of visual imagery and interactive displays. For example, the images of x-rayed bodies provide reminders of physical vulnerability, further heightened by graphic text that celebrates surveillance terminologies; the interactive games orient the bodies of visitors around the gaming machines, and visitors find themselves becoming mechanical extensions of the games themselves, moving tensely and jerkily in response to the flashing lights on screens and their immersion in the tense narratives of the game-worlds. The combined effect is that our live experience of the museum is one that draws attention to our personal physical bodies and the bodies of those who share the space with us.

Ultimately, this leads to amplified perceptions of a binary logic of security and risk. These perceptions are experienced differently depending on the subject position one occupies, and the extent to which someone might successfully enact the dominant characters that the museum prescribes. For visitors who find it easy to identify as an insider, the museum might provide a pleasurable and validating experience, even as it asks them to indulge in moments of security-related anxiety; for those more likely to be deemed outsider, it reinforces feelings of vulnerability, exclusion and fear. Due to the intensity of the museum’s physical-sensory elements, these experiences constitute heightened, and therefore highly theatrical, orderings of border-related identities – and this directly mirrors the heightened theatricality of real-world borders.

By playing with the delineated roles of insider and outsider, I was able to better understand how those characters are constructed and experienced in both real-world border crossings and their representations in the Border Force Museum. This suggests that additional performance autoethnography by scholars from a wider range of diverse backgrounds is vital to understanding these issues with greater nuance. By deliberately emphasising embodied interpretations that depart from majority viewpoints, we might gain crucial insights about performance in border-related museum exhibits; we might also garner new knowledge about the function of performance in the construction of international borders in the world beyond the gallery.

Given that the museum’s exhibits possess the potential to further the discriminatory and exclusionary features of immigration policy and border control, it seems all the more important to conclude this article by returning to the notion that performance autoethnography facilitates ongoing, collaborative generation of knowledge. I invite readers now to reflect on their own experience of reading my account of the Border Force Museum, and draw impressions – or creations - of their own. Perhaps by doing so, the potential for personal experience to offer critical challenges to institutional power might be maximised. Furthermore, our collective understanding of the theatricality of borders – and their representations in museum spaces – can be moved forward in a horizontally-collaborative fashion that directly contradicts the ways that power operates at border control sites.