

Karolina Radłowska

- ▶ University of Białystok
- ▶ e-mail: k.radlowska@uwb.edu.pl
- ▶ ORCID: 0000-0003-4378-2615

BORDERLAND MUSEUMS IN POLAND – TOWARDS A CRITICAL RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – The article develops a theoretical and analytical model for studying museum representations of the borderland, focusing on how these spaces become arenas of memory and identity construction.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – The article is conceptual and based on desk research. It draws on critical literature in museum studies, borderland studies, memory studies, and postcolonial theory. It proposes a qualitative methodology combining critical discourse analysis, visual interpretation, and the study of curatorial strategies that shape narratives about the borderland and the Eastern Borderlands (Kresy).
- ▶ *Score/results* – The article aims to:
 - conceptualise museums as actors in memory politics and identity formation in border regions;
 - analyse tensions between national, local, and minority narratives;
 - propose analytical dimensions (e.g., inclusion/exclusion, center/periphery, symbolic power) for interpreting museum narratives;
 - reflect on the museum's role in shaping discourses on multiculturalism and identity in peripheral areas.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – The article offers a novel contribution by treating the borderland as an analytical category that exposes mechanisms of cultural representation and symbolic hierarchy. It integrates critical borderland studies and postcolonial theory into museum analysis, introduces methodological tools for examining regional museums as cultural actors, and provides insights for both scholars and practitioners seeking more inclusive and dialogical forms of heritage representation.

| **Keywords:** museum, borderland, Eastern Borderlands (Kresy), collective memory, memory politics

1. Introduction

Although museums are commonly regarded as institutions entrusted with the task of preserving and interpreting the past for future generations, in practice they actively mobilise selective representations of the past to construct narratives that legitimise the present [Preziosi, 2012: 25]. The ways in which historical narratives are constructed and interpreted are shaped not only by the institutions themselves, but also by the socio-cultural contexts in which they operate. If we acknowledge that museums are cultural institutions embedded in specific social and political conditions, then the concept of the borderland – with its inherent complexity and ambiguity – presents a distinctive interpretive challenge.

Museums operating in borderland regions, drawing on the cultural heritage of multiethnic communities, produce narratives that – depending on the adopted interpretive strategy – may foster social integration or contribute to the reproduction of social divisions and exclusionary practices. In this sense, the borderland functions as an analytical space for exploring the processes through which collective memory is constructed, their entanglement with memory politics, and their role in shaping collective identities and intergroup relations.

In the context of the growing significance of memory politics and the intensifying contestation over interpretations of the past, museums have emerged as active participants in shaping collective memory and social identity. No longer neutral spaces for presenting historical facts, they are institutions actively involved in the production of narratives embedded in the prevailing symbolic orders. As Benedict Anderson [1991: 163–185] argues, museums play a crucial role in constructing national “imagined communities”; they function as instruments of state-driven identity formation and collective memory production.

This article, conceptual and theoretical in nature, was developed within the framework of a research project.¹ It outlines the main research assumptions, the significance of the subject matter, the theoretical framework, and the methodological rationale. The aim of the project is to develop an analytical framework for examining borderland museums, with particular focus on how the notion of the borderland – as a historical, cultural, and symbolic space – operates within museum narratives in Poland. Special attention is given to institutions the mission

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statements or names of which explicitly refer to the borderland or the *Kresy* – a term used to describe the former eastern territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

2. Towards a critical reflection on borderland museums: theoretical foundations of the project

A museum as a cultural institution is not only a space for collecting and displaying objects but also a site of knowledge and power production, as well as an institution regulating social imaginations of the past and identity [Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Bennett, 1995; Fyfe, 2006]. Museums functioning specifically in borderlands – geographical, symbolic, and cultural – require a critical reflection that takes into account their position within power relations, memory, and representation. This chapter attempts to outline the theoretical framework for a research project focused precisely on such institutions. It draws upon selected concepts from critical museum studies, critical heritage studies, postcolonial theory, and reflections on the notions of borderland and the Eastern Borderlands (*Kresy*) as cultural and ideological constructs.

2.1. Museum as a cultural institution and site of power

One of the key theoretical categories in this project is the museum itself. According to the Polish law, it is defined as an institution the primary areas of the activity of which include collecting, exhibiting, educational, and dissemination activities [Journal of Laws 1997, no. 5, item 24]. On the one hand, museums serve the society, being inclusive institutions that promote diversity and sustainable development [ICOM, 2022]. On the other hand, they function as sites of memory that construct and sustain collective memory.

Owing to the development of critical museum studies, contemporary museums are no longer seen merely as neutral spaces for the collection and presentation of objects, or as “temples of art.” Increasingly, they are understood as institutions embedded within structures of symbolic power, legitimising particular historical narratives [Bennett, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992]. Proponents of the critical heritage studies paradigm, such as Gordon Fyfe, emphasise that museums are themselves sites of knowledge and power production, actively participating in the creation of norms, meanings, and social hierarchies, thereby regulating social perceptions of the past and identity [Fyfe, 2006: 35–36].

2.2. Museums, collective memory, and historical politics

The emergence of public museums in the late 18th century, followed by their dynamic development throughout the 19th century, was closely intertwined with the consolidation of the nation-state [Pomian, 1996]. Simultaneously, this process marked the beginning of the institutionalisation of collective memory. Museums began to collect objects of significant cultural importance that expressed a “national” identity [Anderson, 1991]. In this way, museums became key instruments in shaping shared memory and played a crucial role in constructing social identity through selective representations of the past.

The concept of collective memory was initiated by Maurice Halbwachs, who initially studied the social frameworks of individual memory [Halbwachs, 2008 (1925)]. This concept was further developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann, who distinguished between communicative memory – linked to intergenerational and oral transmission and cultural memory, which is maintained through institutions, symbols, and the media [Assmann, 2009]. These forms of memory do not exist in a vacuum but are deeply entangled with mechanisms of power and political intention.

The literature frequently emphasises the connection between collective memory and mechanisms of power, which employ diverse tools to legitimise specific narratives [Wawrzyniak, 2014: 346–351]. One such a tool is historical politics – understood as a set of actions and strategies employed by the state and other socio-political actors regarding the interpretation, commemoration, and utilisation of the past for social, political, and cultural purposes. Museums play an important role in this process as sites of memory, where the past is selectively presented and interpreted through exhibitions, collections, and educational activities [Kalicka, Witek: 2014, 384].

Drawing on Pierre Nora’s concept, the museum itself can be understood as a “site of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*) – a symbolic space where the past is anchored, and collective memory is structured and preserved [Nora, 2022]. Thus, as a site of memory, the museum not only documents historical events, but actively shapes their interpretation – through thematic selection, curatorial strategies, narrative framing, and the employed interpretative language. Public museums often function as instruments of nation-building, selectively curating the past to produce coherent narratives of belonging.

3. The borderland as an analytical framework in museum studies

Museums do not operate in isolation but are embedded in specific social, political, and cultural contexts that significantly influence their functioning, the form of their exhibitions, and the narratives they construct. A particularly compelling case, worthy of in-depth analysis, is the museum located in a borderland region. The borderland context is shaped by complex historical, ethnic, and cultural processes, which vividly expose mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, negotiation of meaning, and the reproduction of dominant narratives.

Despite the growing interest in the concept of the borderland – both in academic reflection and in social practice – it remains a complex, multidimensional, and therefore problematic notion [Babiński, 1996: 6; Niedźwiecka-Iwańczak, 2020: 283]. As Dariusz Wojakowski points out, this reveals the historical and institutional conditions of the Polish sociology, in which two approaches coexist: a modernist one – emphasising territoriality and ethno-cultural diversity, and a constructivist one – focusing on the relational and symbolic dimension of borders. This tension gives the Polish discourse on borderlands an ambiguous yet theoretically stimulating character [Wojakowski, 1990: 419–431]. A different perspective is offered by Agnieszka Pasięka, who argues that the borderland has become a fashionable and universal academic term – perfectly aligned with scholarly jargon, yet often detached from social realities and susceptible to ideological instrumentalisation [Pasięka, 2016: 127].

The social perception of the borderland is marked by ambivalence, manifested in a variety of often contradictory interpretations. On the one hand, in cultural animation practices and in theoretical reflection, alike the borderland is portrayed as a multicultural space of dialogue [Czyżewski, 2017: 75–86; Nikitorowicz, 1995: 125]. On the other hand, it is also described as a space of socio-cultural tensions and conflicts [Sadowski, 2001]. This ambivalence stems from the fact that borderlands are social and cultural spaces in which national ideologies, state power, and local identities intersect and are continuously negotiated [Donnan & Wilson, 1999: 7].

Additionally, from a critical perspective, the borderland is seen as a peripheral area subjected to symbolic subordination by the center, which leads to the reproduction of the existing hierarchies of power and identity [Zarycki, 2011: 33–54]. In this view, the borderland is not so much a space of openness as a site of tensions and asymmetries inscribed in the logic of center–periphery relations.

The concept of the borderland can also be interpreted through the lens of Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" – as a site of hybridity, negotiation, and cultural translation. In this perspective, the borderland is not merely a peripheral or contested area, but a dynamic arena in which meanings are continuously negotiated and where identity and memory are subject to ongoing reconstruction. This approach shifts the focus from the fixed categories of difference to processes of cultural interaction, symbolic transformation, and the creation of new, hybrid forms of belonging. At the same time, it challenges essentialist understandings of national or ethnic identity by emphasising the productive potential of ambiguity and in-betweenness. [Bhabha, 2010].

In summary, for institutions such as museums operating within the complex reality of the borderland, this constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity: they may either reproduce hegemonic frameworks of memory or open up space for pluralism, critical reflection, and dialogical engagement.

4. "Kresy" or borderland? Contested narratives and postcolonial perspectives

In the Polish academic literature, the concept of the "Kresy" is often used alongside the term "borderland." While some scholars treat the two as synonymous [Babiński, 1994: 5; Sadowski 1995: 40], and others regard them as distinct analytical categories [Bukała, 2006: 15–16; Kwaśniewski, 1997: 77–78], both groups agree that, in contrast to the emotionally charged notion of the "Kresy", the term "borderland" is more neutral and descriptive in nature.

According to this perspective, the "Kresy" refer to specific territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that were lost during the partitions of the eighteenth century and again after World War II – the lands now located within the borders of Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Although the Kresy are often portrayed as a lost "Arcadia," in reality – as Daniel Beauvois emphasises – they were spaces marked by domination, violence, and inequality [Beauvois, 2017: 301–317]. Beauvois and other scholars argue that this Polonocentric category marginalises the native cultures of these territories and overlooks the current existence of independent states and nations [Bukała, 2006: 14–15; Kwaśniewski, 1997: 64]. Some authors go further, drawing parallels between the Kresy and Western colonies, interpreting the Polish presence in these areas as a form of colonial-imperial expansion [Sowa, 2011: 496]. These interpretations are influenced

by the growing impact of the postcolonial theory in the Polish humanities over the past decade. This development has been supported by the translation of seminal works by Edward Said [2005 (1978)], Homi Bhabha [2010 (1994)], and Leela Gandhi [2008 (1998)], as well as by the writings of Polish scholars such as Ewa Thompson, Maria Janion [2006], Bogusław Bakuła [2006, 2011, 2014], and Jan Sowa [2011].

Postcolonial theory – focused on analysing the structures of domination, subordination, and hegemony emerging from colonial experiences – offers valuable analytical tools for studying cultural and historical narratives. While it has traditionally been used to critique Western colonial empires, especially in relation to cultural plunder and the need to decolonise museum collections [Michalik, 2018], its applicability is much broader. As Ewa Domańska [2008: 158] argues, postcolonial critique can be employed wherever power asymmetries, exclusion, and symbolic hierarchies persist.

In this light, the postcolonial theory becomes a means of revealing those aspects of culture and collective memory that are marginalised or silenced, especially in relation to difficult or suppressed histories. Bogusław Bakuła advocates for the use of postcolonial approaches in reinterpreting the Polish Kresy discourse, which he sees not only as an expression of the national nostalgia but also as a central component of the Polish national axiology. According to Bakuła, the Kresy narrative is exclusionary: it constructs the eastern territories not only as lost and heroic, but also as essentially and exclusively “Polish” [Bakuła, 2006: 12–14]. Applying postcolonial theory to the study of borderland museums – including those explicitly devoted to the Kresy – allows for a critical examination of dominant historical narratives and exposes mechanisms of marginalisation, exclusion, or “Orientalisation” of minority groups [Bakuła, 2006; Buchowski, 2006; Zarycki, 2013]. It encourages a reflection on how museums participate in shaping, reproducing, or contesting symbolic boundaries and collective memory, and invites the inquiry into whose voices are represented, and whose remain unheard.

5. Methodology

The aim of this research project is to examine how the concept of the borderland is represented in the exhibitions of the museums operating in the border regions of Poland. The analysis focuses on the content of both permanent and temporary

exhibitions, with particular attention paid to the ways in which cultural heritage is represented, the employed narrative strategies, and the presence – or absence – of minority, local, and national perspectives. The project seeks to identify which visions of the borderland are being promoted, which themes are emphasised, and which remain invisible or marginalised. The main research question posed in the project is as follows: How is the notion of the borderland represented and how does it function within the narratives of borderland museums? In order to deepen this analysis, the project addresses several more specific research questions:

1. What aspects of borderland heritage are emphasised, and which are omitted in the museum narratives?
2. What narrative strategies are used by the museums to construct the image of the borderland?
3. How are national and ethnic cultural heritages represented in the museum storytelling?
4. How do the museums interpret difficult or conflict-laden moments in the history of the region?

The research focuses on the museums the names, missions, and institutional profiles of which explicitly refer to the heritage of the borderland or of the *Kresy* (former Eastern Borderlands). The project includes both institutions located in the contemporary border regions and those situated in the country's interior, which nonetheless refer to the borderland as a symbolic point of reference. The selection encompasses municipal and private museums as well as institutions still in the process of being established.

The study covers, among others: the Museum of Borderland Heritage and Culture in Brzeg Dolny [*Muzeum Dziedzictwa i Kultury Kresów w Brzegu Dolnym*]; the Museum of the Eastern Borderlands in Częstochowa [*Muzeum Kresów w Częstochowie*]; the Museum of the Eastern Borderlands in Węglińiec [*Muzeum Kresów Wschodnich w Węglińcu*]; the Ignaz Reimann Museum of Borderland Culture in Wambierzyce [*Muzeum Kultury Pogranicza im. Ignaza Reimanna w Wambierzycach*]; the Silesian-Lusatian Borderland Museum in Żary [*Muzeum Pogranicza Śląsko-Lużyckiego w Żarach*]; the Museum of the Eastern Lands of the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in Lublin [*Muzeum Ziemi Wschodnich Dawnej Rzeczypospolitej w Lublinie*]; the Borderland Museum in Działdowo [*Muzeum Pogranicza w Działdowie*]; the Museum of the Borderlands in Ostrów Mazowiecka [*Muzeum Kresów w Ostrowi Mazowieckiej*]; and the Museum of Lwów and the South-Eastern Borderlands in

Kukłówka Radziejowicka [*Muzeum Lwowa i Kresów Południowo-Wschodnich w Kukłówce Radziejowickiej*].

Despite differences in the legal status, location, and the character of their collections, these institutions share a common orientation towards the borderland as a framework for interpreting history and cultural identity. The project proceeds from the assumption that museum exhibitions are not neutral presentations of facts, but rather carefully constructed interpretive spaces. Through the selection of artifacts, textual materials, visual arrangements, and broader interpretive context, they generate specific representations of the past. Accordingly, the qualitative content analysis of museum exhibitions, grounded in the principles of critical discourse analysis is the employed core research method. This approach encompasses both the verbal language used in curatorial narratives and the visual strategies of display, with a focus on how museums shape relationships among national, local, and ethnic heritage. The analysis draws on tools developed within discourse studies [van Dijk, 2001], while also incorporating the specificity of museum communication as a form of spatial and visual narration.

The research is structured around the following analytical dimensions:

1. Selection of exhibits – what is included and what is excluded; what types of objects are used to represent the borderland heritage; whether objects relating to ethnic minorities are present;
2. Structure and language of the narrative – analysis of curatorial texts, exhibit descriptions, labels, catalogues, and educational materials;
3. Spatial arrangement – how the exhibition organises relationships between objects, themes, and visitors; whether it constructs hierarchies, contrasts, or tensions;
4. Visuality and aesthetics – the analysis of the visual layer of the exhibition as an element of meaning-making.

In addition to the qualitative analysis of exhibitions, the research also includes semi-structured interviews with the museum staff in order to gain insights into the institutional intentions, curatorial decisions, and internal reflections on the representation of the borderland heritage. Additionally, desk research will be undertaken, focusing on institutional materials such as websites, exhibition catalogues, mission statements, and educational publications. This will serve to contextualise the exhibitions and to explore the wider discursive landscape shaping museum narratives.

6. Conclusion

This project makes an important contribution to the ongoing debates on the role of museums not only as the custodians of heritage, but also as active agents in its interpretation and reinterpretation. By examining museum narratives related to the borderland heritage, it demonstrates how contemporary museums construct images of history, identity, and intergroup relations in culturally and politically complex regions.

The findings provide insight into how the concept of the borderland is framed within institutional narratives, identifying which types of heritage are emphasised and which are marginalised or excluded. The project also uncovers narrative strategies that either promote inclusion or reinforce exclusion of minority groups – an issue of particular relevance in current discussions on multiculturalism, memory politics, and identity.

One of the project's expected outcomes is the development of analytical tools for critically assessing the museum exhibitions as forms of cultural discourse. In addition, it offers practical recommendations for more inclusive curatorial practices. These findings may be of value to both researchers of the heritage and museum studies and professionals – such as curators, educators, and cultural policymakers – interested in fostering more diverse and dialogical representations of the past.

More broadly, the study contributes to the field of critical heritage and museum studies by deepening reflection on how cultural institutions shape social memory and identity, especially in the peripheral and borderland areas marked by historical tensions. Through the analysis of specific case studies, the project reveals the mechanisms of selection, silencing, and symbolic appropriation at work in museum representations of the past, and highlights the tensions between local experiences and national historical narratives.

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