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Re-/Production and Critique of National Discourses in Migration Museums.
An exhibition analysis

This poster examines the role of national discourses in migration museums. It includes a discussion of the exhibition of the Virtual Migration Museum which was created by the Documentation Center and Museum of Migration in Germany (DoMiD e.V.), as well as key theoretical and future perspectives. Based on the observation that national-colonial discourses and exhibitions of migration are interdependent, this poster focuses on how narratives of national belonging are both (re)produced and questioned in migration museums. The theoretical considerations are applied to the Virtual Migration Museum which aims to criticize dominant narratives about migration and make alternative interpretations visible.
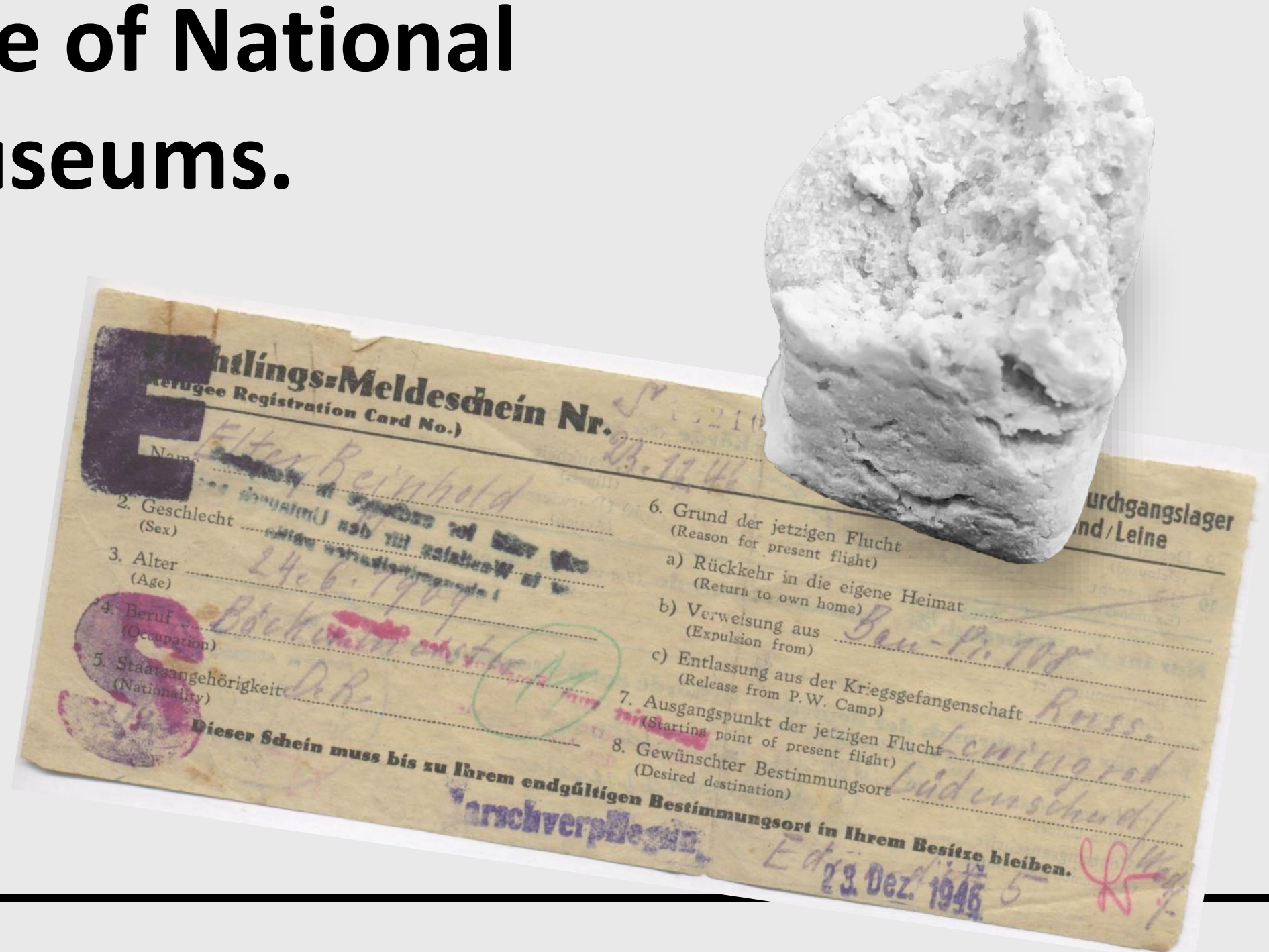
"The goal of the Virtual Migration Museum is to show how migration has shaped our history and continues to shape our society and lives together."

DoMiD e.V.
(Documentation Center and Museum of Migration in Germany)

An exhibition analysis

Initiated by the migrant organisation DoMiD e.V., the **Virtual Migration Museum** exhibits Germany's migration history since 1945. Its aim is to illustrate the **role of migration in shaping the society** and to allow the participation of marginalised voices.

Structure and Contents

The exhibition is divided into **nine thematic buildings** (e.g., railway station: arrival and setting off; school: education; office: bureaucracy), each of which covers the **three time periods** 1945-1973, 1973-1989, 1989-today. Visitors playfully explore a **fictional city** in a freely chosen order. Based on historical facts, the exhibition presents different media and political discourses and representations, personal experiences as well as social changes. It depicts German (im)migration history from **different perspectives**, presenting migration as central to life in Germany.

Links

The **exhibition** of the Virtual Migration Museum can be downloaded here. The website also provides general information about the museum and a glossary of key terms.
Details about DoMiD e.V. and other projects can be found on the **organisation's website.**

Key findings

The museum **critically reflects** the applied **national analytical framework**. However, the exhibition does not abandon this framework entirely, but rather aims to broaden it in order to include other perspectives. The supranational and anti-national potential of migration is only partially presented.
More striking is the **discussion of the social practices and physical reality of national border demarcations** as well as the examination of (national) **power hierarchies** and the demand for participation and co-determination. The Virtual Migration Museums is directed against the notion of national closure and homogeneity and instead creates space for an understanding of a society shaped by diverse migratory movements.

Theoretical Perspectives
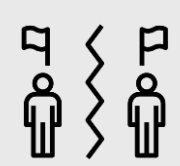
Methodological nationalism
(Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2002)
Involves ignoring the national structuring of modernity, the naturalisation of the nation and the territorial limitation to the national frame in social science analyses.

National-colonial project
(Bayer, 2018)
Since the 19th century, museums in Europe have been restructured as places of 'objective' knowledge based on colonial hierarchies which contributed to the construction of national identities.

Crisis of national narratives
(Baur, 2009)
Despite the continuing influence of national dichotomies (Römhild, 2017), controversies about museum projects are increasing. Diversity through migration is often presented as the new unifying national experience.

Potential of migration museums
(Sutherland, 2014)
Migration museums can stimulate debates about integration, solidarity and national belonging. For example, they link the physical reality of national borders and their symbolic meaning for national discourses.

Migration museums reflect social processes and scientific developments but can also influence them.

Future Perspectives

Migration museums should...

...discuss societal conditions instead of presenting only 'concluded' migration stories. (Nieswand, 2020)

...give up on the idea of a single perspective and create a transnational narrative community. (Gogos, 2021)

...reflect on the production of representation and knowledge orders and permit actual power shifts. (Wonisch, 2020)

...distinguish helpful analytical frameworks from simplistic reductions. (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2002)

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Materiality of Migration