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Heritage and separatism in Barcelona: the case of El Born Cultural Centre

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the ways in which heritage sites at the crux of neighbourhood renewal and redevelopment initiatives in Barcelona have been manipulated to advance Catalan separatist agendas. We focus specifically on El Born Cultural Centre which was officially opened in September 2013 amid heightened calls for Catalan independence from Spain. A former market site, the centre's key attraction is its archaeology which has been re-imagined and presented to communicate the horrors of war inflicted on the citizens of Barcelona following the War of Succession in 1714. Narratives that emphasise the historical degradation of Catalan political or cultural identity and/or work to reaffirm the distinct and separate nature of Catalan nationalism resonated strongly with the political reawakening of Catalonians in the run up to the 2014 November referendum on independence. The referendum which was subsequently deemed illegal by the Spanish government, and subsequent regional elections were held in 2015. In considering the negotiation of El Born during this drive for independence, this paper suggests that an examination of heritage sites and the ways in which they engage with, or are received by multiple stakeholders, can offer insights into the complexity of separatist campaigns in ethno-nationalist societies.

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INTRODUCTION
On 18 September 2014, aspirations for Scottish independence were quashed in a referendum that returned a marginal no vote. Two months later similar calls for Catalan independence were stifled whenever the Spanish government deemed a planned referendum for November 9th illegal. During regional elections in September 2015 Catalan parties in favour of independence won a slight majority but initially failed to form a government. The public face of these particular separatist campaigns occasioned a series of debates about the future of Europe's borders and the far-reaching implications of secession not only for parent states but for the European Union as a political and economic entity. Walt (2014), in an article entitled ‘The Disunited States Europe’, questioned whether the EU could ‘weather the separatist storm’ suggesting that the salience of separatist politics within Europe could
effectively reconfigure the map of Europe and spell the end of the Union. Yet separatism has always been an integral part of the character of Europe. It is increasingly argued that separatist movements are resurgent in many European states, reinvigorated in part by a backdrop of economic crisis and political uncertainty (see Bieri 2014). A number of these separatist movements are associated with violent campaigns for independence (e.g. the Basque Region, Corsica) while others including Scotland and Catalonia have followed a largely peaceful route that has focused on the use of culture and heritage to mobilise support and drive forward separatist agendas (with varying success). Nation-building within ethno-nationalist societies is a hugely complex, emotive and contested process that is driven by many factors. The construction of a culturally homogenous entity involves many different facets that draw upon history, education, contemporary society and culture in an attempt to create a unifying and collective justification for separatism. Heritage plays a central part in these constructs and is used as a vehicle to create a sense of belonging and place (Graham and Ashworth 1994; Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000). Historical knowledge is transformed into heritage through which the subsequent product is either commoditised or shaped to suit the needs of its creators or users (Ashworth, Graham, and Tunbridge 2007). Much of the perceived importance of heritage lies in its interpretation and how nationalist movements can reconfigure their interpretations to suit their political and ideological perspectives. Identity and cultural heritage are then closely entwined.

The context of this paper focuses specifically on the Catalan separatist campaign the eve of its 2014 ‘informal poll’ which saw 80% of the 2.3 million voters cast a vote in favour of independence and the subsequent September 2015 electoral success of the loose independence alliance. It should be noted that only 37% of registered voters actually voted on the day, with large numbers of those not in favour of independence stayed away from the poll. The push for greater autonomy in the Catalan region of Spain has been gaining increasing momentum since the end of the Francoist regime in the 1970s (Crameri 2008). Traditionally, Catalan nationalism has been a peaceful movement seeking greater autonomy, though not full independence from Spain (O’Donnell 1996). A violent campaign conducted by Terra Lliure (Free Land) was active from 1978 to 1995 (Moreno 2005) but failed to attract widespread support. Since 2009 popular demonstrations calling for full independence have become increasingly forceful and the political rhetoric has been notably confrontational. Many facets of Catalan society have become enmeshed in the politics of this process ranging from the teaching of Catalan in schools through to the overt displays of Catalan identity at Camp Nou, Barcelona’s football arena (Hargreaves 2000). Increasingly, policies associated with the promotion and protection of culture and heritage have also become entangled within this emergent discourse. The overarching aim here is to examine heritage practices in Barcelona, the Catalan capital, where physical remains of the city’s urban past have been exposed archaeologically and displayed in a manner that clearly promotes a developing ethno-nationalist agenda in the region. We focus specifically on El Born Cultural Centre which was opened in September 2013 to coincide with the lavish and highly publicised tercentenary celebrations of Barcelona’s fall during the War of Succession, where the presentation and interpretation of a series of post-mediaeval streetscapes in a former market building can be viewed as both partisan and controversial. We question the role this form of overt nationalist discourse plays in the contested environment of Spanish separatist politics and query the validity of this approach in Catalan heritage institutions. In considering the negotiation of El Born on the eve of the referendum, this paper suggests that an examination of heritage sites and the ways in which they engage with or are received by multiple stakeholders can offer can insights into the complexity of separatist campaigns in ethno-nationalist societies.

Catalan separatism

The historical context of Catalan separatism is complex. Following a political union with the Aragon territories in 1137 the maritime condado, or County of Catalonia emerged and held considerable political and economic sway through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This was replaced by a single monarchy in 1479 following the union of Castile and Aragon. Subsequent eighteenth-century
political manoeuvrings in Castile led to the Spanish War of Succession when the Catalanian regions supported an Austrian contender for the crown (Kamen 1969; Elliott 2002). The Treaty of Utrecht (1713) confirmed Philip V as King and a combined Franco-Spanish attack on the Catalan regions led to the siege and fall of Barcelona on 11 September 1714, an event that continues to have major resonance amongst Catalan nationalists (Kamen 2014). Catalonia was subsumed into Spain while its language and institutions of governance were suppressed. Catalanian nationalism surfaced at the close of the nineteenth century as various cultural movements began pressing for greater recognition. The Mancomunitat de Catalunya, or Commonwealth of Catalonia, was established in April 1914, and invested in infrastructure, cultural and scientific institutions. It was subsequently dissolved in 1925. A degree of autonomy was granted during second Spanish Republic (1931–1938). Following the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and Franco's succession the Catalan language, political institutions and cultural symbols including its flag and anthem were again suppressed (Guibernau 2004). In November 1971 a few hundred political and cultural leftist dissidents came together and formed the Assembly of Catalonia, advocating for the reintroduction of autonomy and recognition of Catalan identity and culture (Moreno, Arriba, and Serrano 1998). This movement gained widespread popularity following the death of Franco in 1975. Popular demonstrations on 11 September 1977 argued for a Statute of Autonomy for the region within the newly democratised Spain. This was subsequently granted in 1978, following a constitutional settlement, and enacted the following year. As with all nationalist movements the Catalan movement should not be regarded as monolithic and has considerable intra-group variation. In 2000 the election of a neo-conservative government in Madrid saw an increasing tide of resentment develop across Spain against the secessionist regions including both Catalonia and the Basque region (Cohen 2012). Subsequently the Catalan parliament, supported by a referendum, ratified a Statute of Autonomy in 2006. This was challenged by the Spanish High Court of Justice and its 2010 verdict accepted the idea of a Catalan ‘nation’ but only in terms of its use from an ideological, historical and cultural context (Guibernau 2014, 16). On 11 September 2012 the BBC reported that 1.5 million people across Catalonia held demonstrations advocating for self-determination. Further referendums in 2011 witnessed considerable spatial variation with 552 municipalities participating, but 395 declined to take part (see Muñoz and Guinjoan 2013).

A snap election was called in 2012 by the Catalan premier Artur Mas following the rejection of a new funding model from Spain's central government in Madrid (Martí 2013). A central tenant of the Convergence and Union party's election pledges was a referendum on independence. While the party suffered some electoral losses they were returned to power in the November elections with the support of the Republican Left of Catalonia. On 11 September 2013 more than a million people came out to support the independence movement across Catalonia and formed a 400 km human chain across the region. By contrast between 30,000 and 100,000 federalists marched in support of Spanish unity on October 12th (Guibernau, Rocher, and Adam 2014, 2). Support for independence amongst the Catalan population has been increasing steadily with 42% supporting separatism in 2011 rising to 56% in 2013. This period has also seen a rise in perceptions of Catalan identity with 31% of people in the region seeing themselves as exclusively Catalan, a significant rise from 21% over the previous year (Guibernau 2014, 19, 20). A referendum on Catalonian Independence was initially set for 9 November 2014 by the parliament in Barcelona, a move subsequently blocked by the Spanish government as being unconstitutional. An informal non-binding poll did take place with 2.3 million Catalans voting, again 37% of the electorate, a total number falling considerably short of those eligible to vote. Over 80% of those that did vote, voted for independence. However, the central government claimed (with some justification) that the anti-independence voters 'stayed at home' rendering the result invalid.

One aspect of the Catalan movement for independence is the potential for violence at a number of different societal levels. In recent times Catalonia has not experienced anything like the scale of violent conflict in the Basque region but has been exposed to low-level campaigns of violence by a number of disparate groups. With both the language and the increasingly confrontational activities used by both the pro-unity camps and supporters of independence the potential for violence at a structural, cultural or physical level needs to be addressed. Galtung (1990) has discussed the concept of ‘cultural
any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimise violence in its direct or structural form’ (Galtung 1990, 291). Structural violence by extension can include institutionalised discrimination or elitism at a state level. The significant investment and promotion of cultural centres, dissemination of Catalonia narratives and propagation of Catalan identity are all seemingly designed to promote independence and create a cultural justification for a break from Spain. These activities need to be interrogated and positioned within the broader context of geographical understandings of nation-building and the emergent ethno-nationalist movement in the area. Aligned to these developments is the emergence of a core set of grievances or grievance-based narratives within Catalonia. Grievance sets are recognised as core components of many conflict arenas and if left unchecked can contribute to the emergence of more volatile situations and fuel conflict (see e.g. Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Berdal 2005; Murshed 2009). There are for example a number of base economic arguments centreing on Catalonia’s contribution to the centre in Spain. One key argument is that as a major economic hub, it is keeping the rest of Spain afloat. In addition to economics further grievances centre on the perceived discrimination against Catalan identity, language and symbols.

The emergence and promotion of cultural difference by groups in societies for political purposes is often problematic. These forms of ethno-centric arguments ignore the plurality of heritage and range of external and internal influences that have shaped a region’s history. The creation of master narratives in heritage projects involves ‘eliminating complicating and contradictory detail, by disguising difference, by hiding those elements that don’t quite fit, and by emphasising those that do. Unity rather than difference is emphasised’ (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 24). The relevance of the past to contemporary processes needs to be contextualised and presented within these developments in order to counter what are often imbalanced and self-serving narratives.

**Heritage and separatism in Catalonia**

Within Catalonia both tangible and intangible cultural heritages have been used repeatedly in the past to justify and promote a culturally distinct peoples and region (Mellon 2008). Much of this has taken place against the background of Catalonia’s negotiation of its place within Spain and as an aspirant autonomous region. Galí Espelt and Donaire Benito (2005) have argued that this process of heritage development emerged during the period of ‘national and cultural reawakening’ in the late nineteenth century when, for example, the romanticised physical and visual appearance of Girona was effectively created. A similar process of reconstruction or re-edification took place in Barcelona’s Gothic quarter from 1880 to 1950 as a gothic fabric was created around the mediaeval cathedral to recreate the mediaeval status of this part of the city, conceived as a form of ‘avant la letter historic theme park’ (Ganau 2008; Cócola Gant 2014).

The early monumentalisation of Barcelona in the opening decades of the twentieth century can be seen as a process designed to reposition the city as the capital of the region. The subsequent Modernista buildings of Domènech, Puig and Gaudi illustrated the uniquely Catalan architectural expressions of identity and aspiration. These overly romanticised nineteenth and early twentieth-century discourses are now being displaced by more pragmatic agenda-led cultural narratives that are being used to justify and promote territorial conflicts where landscape and built heritage are presented as ideological cornerstones (Nogué and Vicente 2004, 113, 129). Subiros (2003, 304) noted that Barcelona from the 1970s became a driving force for the ‘defence and reconstruction’ of Catalanonan language and culture through its institutions, public policies and community movements. A similar process was effectively reigned in the last decade with the commissioning of public art, signature buildings and public spaces across the urban fabric of Barcelona (Smith 2005). Local authorities deliberately set out to exploit the historic built cultural heritage of Barcelona to both revive the city and play a part in the reconfiguration and promotion of Catalan identity (Mellon 2008, 3). Byrne (2008) has noted that this form of heritage preservation is also a form of social action with deliberate policies and outcomes perceived. The forms of.globalist iconography projecting internally across Catalonia were also built for a wider Spanish and external international audience and are designed to show the growing
confidence and success of the Catalan peoples and their place in a rapidly changing world. Hamilakis (2007, 58) has referred to similar developments from elsewhere across the Mediterranean littoral as a process of developing the ‘monumental topography of the nation’. Similarly, Díaz-Andreu (1995) has argued that each of Spain’s regional groupings including Catalonia have utilised archaeology to legitimise their cultural aspirations and sense of separate identity. More recently Landers (2010), for example, has argued that the designation of World heritage Sites in the region has been partially a politicised process designed to reflect a distinctive cultural region with a past that is distinguishable from the broader Iberian region. Designation and promotion of heritage is then seen as part of a broader Catalan nation-building project.

**Re-imagining El Born**

Arguably the most obvious physical manifestation of the utilisation of heritage as a political statement or weapon has been the development of El Born Culture centre in central Barcelona. Originally built in the nineteenth century as a covered vegetable market, renovation works began in 2001 (to convert the site into a library). The preparatory ground works uncovered the well-preserved remains of this area’s post-mediaeval streetscape covering an area 8000 m² (Figure 1). This part of the city was inhabited from at least the fifth century AD although the research focus of the Born project was very much on later remains. The excavated site contained the remains of nine streets, 115 plots and 53 houses dating from the sixteenth through to early part of the seventeenth century. Both the level of preservation and the dating of the physical remains to the late seventeenth century, prior to the levelling of much of the neighbourhood for the construction of a large Spanish citadel and esplanade, led to a widespread public campaign calling for the preservation of the archaeological remains *in situ* (Torra 2013).

In 2006 work began on developing a cultural centre at the site which, once opened, would serve a number of objectives. Three primary functions were identified. It would first serve as an exhibition space for the archaeological site, facilitating a ‘dialogue between heritage and Modernity’ (Torra 2013). Museums and archaeological sites can function as tools for constructing and creating visual representations of regional or national identities and produce narratives of a country’s national story (McLean 1998; Mason 2007). Secondly, it would contextualise the events of 1714 to facilitate the ‘recovery of the memory of the Catalans’ when the people of Barcelona rose up to defend their ‘freedoms and rights’
following a Bourbon attack on the city (Torra et al. 2013, 11). This period has become increasingly important within the separatist campaign. While younger generations can avail and tap into familial narratives of life in Catalonia under Franco, facilitating an engagement and promoting an awareness of the Bourbon repression is much more difficult. Harnessing a collective memory of those events has been much more complex. Fostering this new collective memory on the eve of the referendum became a key priority for policy makers within Catalonia and as such the 1714 commemorative programme was imagined with El Born at its core. Thirdly the centre would be a key Catalan cultural venue, a facility ‘that helps to construct the collective image of a powerful, open, universal Catalan culture that is true to Catalonia’s national identity’ (Torra et al. 2013, 12). These aims are omnipresent in the physical layout and signposting of the site itself. For example, the signage within the Centre states that it ‘aspire to become a meeting point of Catalan Culture’ through a series of displays that encourage ‘a renewed reading of the past’ that will facilitate the ‘recovery of the memory of the Catalan people’. As you enter the centre from one of its two opposing entrances the visitor is greeted by a series of very large, ceiling-hung, banners with one proclaiming that the ‘Soul of the Born awakes’ while another carries the slogan ‘Viure Liure 1714/2014’ or ‘Live Free 1714/2014’. The central focus of the centre is the exposed archaeology and visitors walk around the semi-subterranean remains on a raised platform at current ground level, onto which are attached a series of panels interpreting the remains in their historical and contemporary context. The politicised nature of this interpretation is immediately striking. Working clockwise around the centre visitors are informed on a panel entitled The Bourbon Repression that the defeat of 1714 ‘opened the doors to the repression’ and that the Catalans ‘worldview suffered a radical mutation subjugated by a regime classified by many historians as military terrorism’. When the Catalan regiments and local guilds handed over the flags of St Eulalia and St George to the Spanish conquerors their ‘symbolism was so powerful that … their loss signified the end of the Catalan nation’. The subsequent seventeenth-century partial demolition of this part of Barcelona to facilitate the construction of the citadel was initially resisted and viewed as being ‘absurd’ by the local residents but the subsequent building work resulted in a ‘mutilated city’. The city, prior, to the siege, is interpreted as a veritable utopian paradise. According to the interpretative displays it was a city ‘full of ornamental and vegetable gardens, waterwheels, fountains, fruit trees and a wide diversity of flowers from different parts of the world … Painting, music and dance’ filled the city and its residents had a ‘strong affinity for clothes with vivid colours, celebrations, dancing and music’. Barcelona would, of course, have contained elements of these but, like all early eighteenth-century cities, would also have been marked by poverty, class division and disease (Permanyer 2011). The closed, almost oppressive, space that the excavations show this quarter would have been like stand in stark contrast to the open leisure spaces depicted on contemporary paintings selectively chosen for display on the panels.

One further factor that is significantly overlooked is the complexity of the 1714 event itself. Depicted in El Born as a courageous last stand of a nation fighting to preserve its independence, identity and culture, the war, like all wars and conflict, was far more complex than this. Historians such as González Cruz (2009) instead suggest that the war is better interpreted as a conflict between competing dynasties rather than as a struggle between two nations. In the immediate post-conflict period Catalan separatism did not emerge but was instead a cultural phenomenon that develops in the nineteenth century. In a more recent addition to the centre a series of panels linking literature and writers from the Franco period to the Catalan nationalist cause have been erected along the eastern wall of the centre. These writers and activists are titled the ‘Martyrs of the Catalan Cause’. There is a clear sense that as the centre develops it is striving to integrate all aspects of culture into its propagation of the Catalan identity and separatism. The Centre then contains a variety of interpretative displays that present a highly revisionist version of the Spanish Wars of Succession and the 1714 siege in particular. The displays encourage the visitor to effectively gaze upon a moment frozen in time at the close of the siege when Barcelona and the Catalan peoples lost their rights and freedom. To use the language of one of the panels – ‘Nothing was ever the same again’.

The far-reaching scope and intent of El Born underscores the traditionalist, and probably dated, role some museums play in forming nationalist discourse. The rise of nationalism in Europe and the
establishment of nation-states during the nineteenth century coincided with the transformation of museums into public educational institutions. A number of those museums allowed nationalist movements to use selective interpretations of history to construct a distinct cultural identity, which then became the basis for the right to sovereignty (Okita 1997; Bradburne 2000). These forms of heritage institutions have often been used to propagate, or are at least providers, of a nation’s ‘origin story’ or ‘origin myth(s)’ (Graham and Ashworth 1994). They are constructed to shape a nation’s collective memory and inform the central narratives that are used to define a group of peoples and are driven by political or social agendas. As Hooper-Greenhill (2000, 150) notes ‘museums have begun to re-evaluate their social roles and to reposition themselves in relation to their audiences. New forms of museum pedagogy are demanded’. An integral part of El Born’s social role is to tap into the structural grievances or grievance set that is presumed by the separatist movement to exist within Catalan nationalism.

Political expediency determined the date of the Centre’s opening. It was officially opened to the public on 11 September 2013 on Catalonia’s National Day (La Diada) which commemorates the fall of Barcelona to Castilian troops in 1714 during the Spanish War of Succession. It also marked the beginning of a year of official commemorations to mark the tercentenary of 1714 with El Born positioned as the hub of much of the year’s activities. The commemorative programme was heavily promoted and funded by the Catalan government and Barcelona City Council, with El Born framed as the focal point for nationalist expression with many of the events happening at the centre or in association with it. Utilising the motto Viure Lliure (‘Live free’, from the expression ‘viurem lliures o morirem’, ‘we shall live free or die’) and a tag line of The Struggle for Freedom of the Barcelona People (http://tricentenari.bcn.cat/en) the organisers referred to the planned events as providing ‘a reference point from which to reflect on our political future and our relations with Europe’.

The inaugural event in El Born was the staging of a play ‘Auca del Born’, which paid homage to the citizens of 1714 who lived and fought in the then neighbourhood of Le Ribera (La Vanguardia 2013). Significantly the play was performed not in one of the Centre’s many open spaces but in the excavated site itself. By recreating the events of 1714 within the landscape it is presumed to have taken place in, the story of El Born and the narratives of oppression bound up within it were given an even more powerful platform. The staging of Auca arguably reduced opportunities for dissonant or alternative interpretations of the site’s meaning and attempted to nurture a closer bond between those who engage with the site and the past (and therefore the present). A further event at the Centre took a decidedly different approach to Auca. In November 2014 El Born hosted a weeklong programme of events dedicated to Spanish historic literature specially dealing the War of Succession (http://tricentenari.bcn.cat/en). These readings and workshops appealed to a broader cross-section of society and fed into a series of contemporary debates on the future of Catalonia. One of the events was a public debate on what it meant to be part of contemporary Europe. In tandem with El Born’s opening was the creation of 1714 ‘trail’, effectively an open air map allowing people to engage with key sites in the war and retrace pivotal points of which El Born was marked as a key site. Another iconic site was Montjuïc, a site which has played a key role in Catalan nationalism in the seventeenth Century and later separatism in the 1900s. Battles were re-enacted at Montjuïc, a site which had played a pivotal role in 1714. It was deliberately marketed as a way of ‘staging a dialogue between the past and present’ and presented as a ‘civic commemoration’ designed to reach a number of diverse audiences.

The commemorative programme was not confined to Catalonia. Lectures and seminars were held across Europe. A conference in Utrecht in April 2014, saw Miquel Calcada (2014), the Director of the 1714 Tercentenary Commemorations give a powerful speech to academics and European diplomats: ‘What is happening in Catalonia today is clearly a bottom up process. It is people who are doing the pushing, and the institutions are positioning themselves accordingly. It is an entire population that is speaking, that is mobilising, within the content of a European Union where … conflicts and demands are not resolved through force of arms but through the force of the ballot box, democratically’. Most recently, in a highly symbolic view, the leaders of the pro-independence alliance in the November 2015 elections, came together in front of the El Born Centre at the announcement of the results to
greet the crowds of supporters who had gathered there. The centre had now effectively become the cultural epicentre of the independence movement.

**Consuming and contesting El Born**

Museums become symbols of the collective social memory constituting the ‘imagined community’ a space where the nation could present itself, to itself and to others (Anderson 1983). As illustrated by the scope and reach of the 1714 tercentenary commemorations El Born is framed as a civic space which aims to engage multiple audiences in a conversation about Catalonia’s past, present and future. The centre, for example, employs a trilingual approach to its exhibits and artefacts with signposting in Catalan, Spanish and English (with guide books available in French, German and Dutch). The political mobilisation of external visitors arguably is just as important as the mobilisation of the city’s residents. The capacity of tourists for example to harness political messages and utilise them in a way that can be conducive to political agendas has been the subject of much debate (see Lennon and Foley 2000; Lisle 2004). While El Born may on first glance seem relatively distanced from the type of landscapes that political tourists consume in other ethno-nationalist societies such as Palestine and Northern Ireland (where the landscape is replete with the physical markers of division and separation) the language employed and the presentation of the exhibits, set against the backdrop of the 2014 referendum, do expect tourists to engage with and understand Catalan grievances and their historical roots and therefore have a degree of empathy with the quest for greater autonomy from Spain. In this way, tourists become vehicles for the transmission of a political cause and are expected to transmit these narratives to their respective homelands. Tourists are however only one user group. In the year between the centre’s opening and the proposed referendum, El Born facilitated public debates, school visits, exhibits, lectures, concerts and political rallies.

As part of the research undertaken for this article a short qualitative survey was undertaken of individuals both in and around the Cultural Centre in order to gauge responses to it. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a period of two days in October 2014, repeated again in October 2015, and were intended to assess the perceptions that existed of the Centre. In 2014 a total of 74 interviews were conducted, 41% of whom identified themselves as either Catalan or Spanish while the remaining 59% came from other countries and were mostly visiting tourists. Just over 10% of these were resident in Barcelona, either studying or working. While the majority of those interviewed were aware of and had visited the Centre few saw any difficulties with the interpretations. Most saw it as a museum-type attraction that was there to interpret the old city. Four respondents suggested that it was an integral part of Catalan resistance. Only two of the 74 respondents noted issues with the Centre. A Woman from Scotland, but resident in Barcelona, suggested that El Born’s function was to ‘brainwash’ the city’s population and that its historical interpretations were both biased and highly controversial. A second Spanish interviewee suggested that the Centre was anti-Spanish and had been developed as a form of revenge for the abuses suffered during the Franco regime. While criticisms of the centre were in the minority of this particular sample, they clearly do exist and represent a challenge for separatist narratives. It is appropriate at this point to highlight the distinction between a national historiography fulfilling the need for a communal identity and one fostering an exclusive and negative form of nationalism. If the connection between museums and the construction of national identity is misguided and potentially dangerous, is it possible for museums, which are essentially political institutions, to maintain independence from overtly political viewpoints and ensure against the deliberate misuse of history? This is a complex question and is one which we do not propose to address here but will return to it in a future paper examining the wider Catalonian region.

We conducted a second day-long survey on Wednesday 21 October 2015 in the immediate vicinity of the El Born Centre. A total of 77 short interviews were conducted, asking the same questions as 2014. Of the 77 respondents 22 identified themselves as Spanish, 25 as Catalan and 30 were tourists from outside of Spain. In contrast to the 2014 survey, the preliminary results returned a higher degree of ambivalence towards the centre and a growing degree of negativity. While a slight majority of the
respondents were largely complimentary about the centre, stating that it was ‘interesting’ and a good place to go to if you were interested in history and Catalan culture, a range of dissenting voices were also present. Three respondents, a Spanish, Catalan and Argentinian tourist suggested that the Centre was a political vehicle for independence. Two of the respondents suggested it was a ‘political driver for nationalism’, possibly reflective of the growing media debate surrounding its development. One Catalan respondent commented that it was developed by a ‘small band of elite people’ who were seeking independence for their ‘own ends’. This respondent was especially interesting as they were involved in a personal capacity with the Centre. The responses of those who identified as Catalan was reflective of the broad equal division across society of those who both support and oppose independence. Two Catalans suggested that the Centre represents our ‘desire for independence’ and for ‘Catalan unity’, while another commented that the Centre was ‘not representative of everyone’. Two further Catalan respondents suggested that the money building the Centre could have been better spent elsewhere on health or education.

An analysis of the Spanish media’s coverage of El Born’s opening offers a significant insight into the way in which the Centre is received outside of Catalonia. Jacinto Antón (2013) in a scathing article for Spain’s largest national newspaper El País accused the Centre of blatantly attempting to sway the outcome of the referendum. Antón points to the many hundreds of messages written in the guestbook, a majority of which reinforce the importance of Catalan independence. Many visitors reference the referendum suggesting that the answer must be ‘yes’. Referring to the potency of the narratives on display Antón suggests that El Born has tried to position itself as ‘part-Yad Vashem part theme-park’ and criticises the architects of El Born for presenting narratives of oppression (with residents being massacred by the Bourbon regime) in a similar light to the Holocaust. He goes further stating that the Centre effectively detracts from the gravity of the narratives being presented. The theme-park labelling/disneyfication of the site not only makes light of the past but perhaps lends to the delegitimisation of the separatist argument, of which El Born is a key part of.

The opening of El Born attracted criticism from Catalonians also, reaffirming that ethno-nationalist groups are not monolithic entities. One of the most pressing criticisms came from a group of 150 neighbourhood residents who gathered to protest not at the narratives of El Born but its very existence. They criticised the redevelopment of the area, claiming that car parking and the heavy volume of anticipated tourists would change the character of the neighbourhood. Residents accused the City’s Major, Artur Trias, of ignoring that part of the city throughout his time in office, only enticed to visit by the prospect of a red carpet opening and a glass of champagne. As Trias and his political counterparts celebrated the opening of the centre in a lavish reception, the crowds outside staged a protest. While this particular criticism does not necessarily illustrate divergence of political opinions on the future of Catalonia it does offer an insight into the frustrations of a cross-section of the city’s residents and their feeling towards the political elite. It offers a small insight into the nuances of separatism. In this instance the civic rights of residents took precedence over questions of sovereignty. It is suggested here that issues on the ground or everyday concerns were a greater priority at least for the residents of the El Born neighbourhood than broader issues of national identity and belonging.

In 2014 the journalist Tonie Soler de Silvas commented in an interview that for all its criticisms, El Born ‘is however still a museum with an important role to play in the culture sphere’. It is then a site that is laden with responsibility-political, social and cultural. Soler de Silvas, who was one of the key organisers of the tercentenary commemorations and curator at El Born, further argued that there is an inherent complexity in trying to present narratives of the past and reconcile them with the expectations of the political mainstream. The political landscape of the present is always instrumental in influencing the ways in which the past is retold and this is true of El Born.

**Conclusion**

The El Born Cultural Centre provides an interesting case study of how cultural institutions and heritage sites have become part of broader political agendas within separatist politics within Europe. While
the political manipulation of the past as heritage is nothing new, the ways in which it is explicitly tied with referendums poises some interesting questions for discussion. Mobilising political participation is a complex and challenging task that involves many layers and approaches. Heritage practices clearly play an important role. The utilisation of heritage to promote separatism by the Barcelona authorities is not unique in Europe. It shares many parallels with nation-building processes in Scotland. The nationalist government in arguing for independence from the UK stated that;

An independent Scotland will enable culture and heritage to flourish as a driver in our continued development and as an aspect of our everyday lives. The expression, celebration and development of our traditional and distinct Scottish culture will be given further impetus with independence. (Scottish Government 2013)

Within Scotland, McLean (1998) documented the rapid expansion and development of new museums and exhibits across Scotland as the Edinburgh Parliament invested in the reassertion of Scottish identity in a new phase of nation building. Bhandari (2011) has documented the use of heritage across the southwest of Scotland to promote a new nationalism and a homogenous identity for the country as a whole. Particular emphasis was placed on the site of the Battle of Bannockburn where Robert the Bruce defeated the English armies of Edward II in 1314. A new £9 million visitor centre at the site, funded by the Scottish government and the Heritage Lottery Fund, opened on 1 March 2014, 700 years after the battle and six months before the referendum.

Heritage sites are therefore key vehicles for the articulation of grievances within ethno-nationalist societies. El Born, the Catalan ‘ground zero’ paints a picture of a region victimised and oppressed because of its unique cultural identity and hopes to mobilise a generation of voters who will change Catalonia’s political future. Bottling the revolutionary spirit of 1714 became the overarching aim in the months leading up to the 2014 November ‘poll’. This deliberate use of a selective historical perspective is problematic. The events of 1714, as seen through a Catalan separatist lens, are reimagined as a simple historical duality between a free, independent and distinctive Catalan nation being suppressed and oppressed by an external ‘other’. Such an analysis is overly simplistic, and ignores the significant complexities of politics and society in eighteenth-century Europe. The streetscapes, buildings and material culture uncovered during the excavations at the El Born site are well preserved and represent an important archaeological complex in this area of Barcelona. However, the remains deserve a more nuanced, and less selective interpretation, than that which is currently offered. Heritage is an intrinsic part of peoples’ culture and identity. Its interpretation and conservation comes with responsibilities. The extent to which those responsibilities have been met here is debatable. While there has been much discussion over the potency of Catalan separatism and its ability to engage the majority of the voting population, there is little doubt that a ‘yes’ vote in the 2014 ‘Poll’ from 2.3 million Catalonians represent a formidable challenge to Spanish unity. The coming years in Catalonia will be watched with considerable interest.

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