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Abstract

We live in a radically ‘cosmopolitanised’ world, facing a plethora of mostly unwanted or unforeseen cross-cultural encounters as side effects of global trade and global threats (Beck, 2006). The potentially positive role of both cultural tourism and museums in this context has been widely recognised and theorised. But what does cross-cultural dialogue mean for the person experiencing it, and how is it negotiated within time and space? Drawing on a long-term narrative study of global visitors to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), I explore cross-cultural meanings empirically through a hermeneutic interpretation embedded in Beck’s ‘cosmopolitan critical theory’. The evidence presented in this research suggests that the individual is the point of departure from which cross-cultural dialogue is humanised by giving it ‘faces’ and stories. I argue that the impact of any travel experience is best understood via the meanings tourists make and negotiate in the long-term.

Introduction

Global phenomena such as trade and threats have shaped the inevitable ‘cosmopolitan outlook’ of the 21st century (Beck, 2006). ‘Cross-cultural dialogue’ has been politically conceptualised and intellectually scrutinised in this context and both cultural tourism and museums are claimed to play a central role. But what does cross-cultural dialogue mean for the individual experiencing it, and how is it negotiated within time and space?

‘Museums’ and ‘tourism’ are both relatively new and burgeoning objects of academic analysis. Their interconnectedness and mutual dependence has been recognised and extensively theorised. Although both fields are constantly diversifying due to their appropriation of a myriad of related disciplines, research tends to operate in discursive cycles producing such totalities as the museum, the culture, the state or the tourist. Laclau (2005: 71) warns against the definition and use of any such reductionist category, which he calls an ‘empty signifier’ with ‘its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness.’

Another prevalent facet both fields have in common is the dichotomy between ‘production’ and ‘consumption’. Kratz and Karp (2006: 19) readily admit in their latest seminal volume that ‘more analytical emphasis is devoted to production than to consumption’ and highlight that this limitation is shared by most other literature in museum studies. Likewise with tourism studies, Ateljevic (2000) proposes to move beyond a binary opposition towards the ‘circuits of tourism’. Nevertheless, the economically determined terminology of ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ inevitably renders the ‘most ineffable of cultural phenomenon - experience’ (Healy and Witcomb, 2006: 1.4) as purely economic and thus forecloses a more nuanced understanding.
It would be naive to deny the centrality of economic processes in contemporary life in general and in museums and tourism in particular. However, the problem starts when we translate ‘the economy’ into a self-defined homogenous instance operating as the ground of society...a single, self-defining mechanism’, as Laclau (2005: 237) argues. Laclau (2005: 230) stresses the need to understand capitalism as an essentially heterogeneous ‘complex’ rather than a ‘self-enclosed totality’. In line with this convincing argument he equally refuses to understand ‘discourse’ as a totalizing concept restricted to linguistic expressions, but rather as ‘any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role’ (Laclau, 2005: 68). To overcome these reductionist tendencies in social analysis, Laclau (2005) splits the ‘group’ as a social unit into demands, which in his view are articulated and lead to any group unity.

In a similar vein, Hall (1996: 14) theorizes contemporary notions of the concept of ‘identity’ as the intersection of agency and discourse, concluding that ‘what remains is the requirement to think this relation of subject to discursive formations as an articulation.’ These analytical units of demands and articulations are the point of departure for this study. In the following section I outline the framework for the research which explores theoretical notions through an empirical understanding of the individual experience. This enables me to dissect and humanize the totality of ‘cross-cultural dialogue’ by giving it ‘faces’ and stories.

**Humanizing ‘contact zones’**

The conceptual understanding of museums as ‘contact zones’, initially advocated by Clifford (1997) as places of contentious and collaborative relations and interactions, is the most appropriate starting point for such an endeavor. Unsurprisingly, this conceptual vision has been critiqued as being merely a reconstruction of the reformist agenda and citizenry technology of the state (Bennett, 1998). However, in a remarkable shift in thinking, from museums as totalitarian state expressions and powerhouses to ‘differencing machines’, Bennett (2006) himself later admitted that museums might indeed be associated with ‘contact zones’. More contextualised and historicised research shows that a museum indeed can function as a site where a complex web of demands and articulations is expressed, negotiated and contested (MacDonald, 2002; McCarthy, 2007). It is now my task to further humanize such a ‘contact zone’ and shed light on the meanings made by the visitors who are mostly overlooked in studies of both museums and tourism.

**Theoretical framework**

According to Bruner (1995), there are three fundamentally human frameworks through which people make sense of the world - the intersubjective, the instrumental and the normative. Any individual meaning is thus a human action embedded in a cultural value system as well as the social structure through which such a system is organised and lived. Consequently, Bruner (1995:27-28) argues that the ‘Self is the centre of gravity of all systems of meaning making’ and ‘the intersection of culture and individual identity’. The dissection of this ‘balancing act’ (Bruner, 2002:78) between autonomy and commitment and between agency and discourse is the heart of this critically and theoretically informed empirical study of the human experience.
Habermas’ (1987) groundbreaking ‘theory of communicative action’, which shifted the focus from economic determination to communicative agency within the realm of the social sciences, is also useful in achieving the above proposed synthesis. However, his clear distinction between system and lifeworld and Bruner’s monocultural outlook do not sufficiently account for the contingency, fluidity and hybridity of the human experience in the 21st century, which necessitates a further refinement of the theoretical framework for this study.

Latour’s (2005) ‘actor-network theory’ challenges the predominant sociological notion of the social domain or society as a discrete and intangible totality which determines all observable human phenomena through its inherent power structures. Unlike Habermas, Latour refuses any clear distinction and division and argues that contemporary societies, at least in the Western world, are made up of collectives, of actor-networks of human and non-human agents engaged in actions, processes, relations, and associations. Such theoretical understanding facilitates the dissection of supposedly homogenous discourses to the level of the individual. In other words, discourses can only be traced and ultimately opened for scrutiny through the agent, through whom any discourse is originated, enacted and ultimately changed.

But how do people give meanings to their experiences and how can we detect their demands and articulations? To answer this important question I return to Bruner (1990: 56) who concludes that ‘the typical form of framing experience (and our memory of it) is in narrative form’. According to Bruner (1995), narrative combines the three frameworks of meaning-making into a temporally extended story with translocal meanings, leading to the ‘narrative creation of self’ (Bruner, 2002). This reasoning, like the vast majority of Western academic knowledge production, can rightfully be critiqued for its purely Western focus. However, Maori scholars such as Royal (2004) equally stress the central role of narrative in constructing reality and transmitting meaning, especially in oral cultures.

**Methodological approach**

The biographical narrative approach therefore represents the most appropriate methodology to understand meaning-making processes among humans. It seeks an understanding of individuals in relation to their socio-cultural environment and thus of society within a socio-political and historical context. Sartre called for an appropriate method to study humans as ‘universal singulars’ (Denzin, 1989:9) and the literature provides several examples of how the biographical narrative approach can shed light on the particular and universal dimensions of human experiences (Davidson, 2006; Denzin, 1989; Elliott, 2005; Roberts, 2002; Wengraf, 2001).

Semi-structured and in-depth narrative interviews were chosen as the primary method for this study. The main advantage of this method is that it avoids the findings, or knowledge claims, being ‘artificialised’ (Bruner, 1990) by the researcher’s ‘system of relevancy’ (Wengraf, 2001). Other available methods, even qualitative ones, are organised by the researcher and thus are more likely to lead to consciously constructed and, in the case of a controversial topic, socially desired responses (Davidson, 2006; Elliot, 2005). A narrative description instead leaves it up to the interviewee to
retrospectively construct meanings. Wengraf (2001) proposes a three-stage analytical structure of biographical narrative interviews:

**Stage one:** the researcher asks a single question to initialise the interview and elicit the interviewee’s narrative. It must be made clear that the interviewer will not interrupt or prompt and any intervention must be of non-directional nature.

**Stage two:** following the narrative-eliciting question in stage one, in stage two ‘narrative-pointed questions’ will be asked, which are restricted to the topics and themes brought up by the interviewee and the order in which these were raised in stage one. This limited intervention and guidance by the researcher in stage one and two facilitates the ‘system of relevancy’ of the interviewee to reveal itself.

**Stage three:** the third and final stage is organised by the researcher’s ‘system of relevancy’ and asks ‘narrative-pointed’ or non-narrative questions to harmonise the narrative material of the first two stages with the research question.

I conducted narrative interviews with visitors to Te Papa from Australia, Canada and the USA. Follow up interviews will be carried out six months after the original interviews with participants in their respective home environments. This paper discusses the analysis of the initial interviews while the longitudinal design of the research as well as its ongoing nature will be re-emphasised in the conclusion. Clearly the short length of this paper will not enable the argument to be fully developed. It should, however, provide a useful glimpse into an inevitably complex phenomenon.

**Bicultural meanings**

Surveying Aotearoa New Zealand’s bicultural journey in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. It is worth highlighting that in line with the theoretical framework used here, ‘biculturalism’ has never been a linear, one-dimensional and superimposed ideology by the state, but a dynamic, organic and contentious process fuelled by coercion, resistance and negotiation. McCarthy (2007) shows how the remarkable encounter of Māori and Europeans unfolded throughout the colonial cultures of display in museums, ultimately leading to Māori control and ownership of Māori collections and exhibitions. Te Papa is committed to developing as a bicultural organisation based on the partnership principle of the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Māori. The Treaty is widely regarded as the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand and after decades of negligence it has gained constitution-like status in recent years. Concrete policies and practices such as Mana Taonga and Mātauranga Māori ensure Māori participation and involvement in the museum (Hakiwai, 2006).

The bicultural concept is a heavily contested work in progress. Various scholars have questioned its contemporary socio-cultural (O’Sullivan, 2007; Royal, 2008) and museological relevance (Henare, 2005; Message, 2006; Thomas, 1994). It is my intention, however, to ‘withdraw from the objectifications and explanations of historical science and sociology to the artistic, historical and lingual experience which precedes and supports these objectifications’ (Ricoeur, 1981: 119). This is what hermeneutics promises, as Ricoeur (1981: 119) argues. It enables us to ‘return to the Lebenswelt...construed as designating the reservoir of meaning, the surplus of sense in living
experience, which renders the objectifying and explanatory attitude possible.’ In other words, the individual experience is the point of departure from which to understand, explain and theorise.

My exploration of the bicultural experience of global visitors to Te Papa through an in-depth analysis of narrative interviews quickly highlighted the ‘intrinsic variability of possible meanings and their interpretations’ (Bauman, 1978: 230). It further revealed the ‘intimate bond between the meaning and the reader’s world’ (Bauman, 1978: 230). Although we are not dealing with a text as such, it becomes clear that museological representation also ‘is a dumb object which only the act of interpretation-by-placement can force to speak’, as Bauman (1978: 230) puts it.

But let us turn to some stories which support such a claim. The italicised sections of the quotes represent the empirical evidence for my theoretical conclusions. Here Jack, a Canadian pensioner travelling on a cruise through the Pacific, describes parts of his Te Papa experience:

The other thing that strikes me is of course the - I don’t see a predominance - the respect for Māori culture is very evident. You know the space, the design afforded to everything like Waitangi, the presence of Māori blended, it is a blending of Māori artefacts with Western art, you know, the two together...One has a real sense of a country that sees itself as, I hate the world ‘melting pot’ because it’s so much linked with the Unites States and I come from a country where it’s different cultures living together in harmony. And I sense I shouldn’t say the Canadianism of that in this exhibit, but many have come from many different backgrounds but have formed the country together. So in that regard it felt Canadian to me I suppose. In fact it felt very Canadian in many ways except it was New Zealand and I haven’t seen it done that well in Canada at all.

Similar to Jack’s Canadian feel of Te Papa and its blending of Māori and Non-Māori together, we see in the story of Charlotte, a New Zealand born Australian, how inextricably linked her background and constructed meanings are:

I think it was just the whole inclusion of it together. It’s so different to the Australian perspective. So if you go to, not that I really go to a lot of Australian museums myself, but if you go and look at displays or tourist and culture things in Australia you have either got the Aboriginal cultural experience or you have got the European cultural experience. There is not really a lot of that cross-cultural stuff... like the Golden Days display they had half a dozen shots of cute little white kids and all that sort of stuff and than there was some Māori cultural shots. So it didn’t seem to matter what display you went into there was a part of you know Māori culture in that display. It wasn’t as separate you know.

Other terms the interviewees used to articulate their bicultural interpretations or meanings, apart from the above ‘blending’ and ‘inclusive’, were ‘merging’, ‘interlinked’ and ‘marriage’. However, in the case of Mike, an Australian student, the perceived lack of such relationship is critiqued within a particular context. This reminds us of Bauman’s (1978: 230) claim that ‘the fullest understanding one can think of is still context-dependant and context-confined.’

It didn’t really, from what I could see it didn’t delve too much into like how much they fought with each other. I am still quite unsure on that like that first meeting. Like obviously some
tribes would have been friendly towards the Europeans, whether the Europeans were friendly back though!? I am trying to think, whereabouts is there a section that’s specifically on that?!

Mike’s assessment gives weight to several studies in the literature critiquing Te Papa’s partially dichotomous approach to biculturalism separating the various ethnic groups into distinct categories at the expense of their interaction and exchange (Henare, 2005; Message, 2006; Williams, 2003). That the encounter between cultural display and visitor can be affected, limited or even prevented by the latter’s interpretive community, the ‘reader’s world’, becomes apparent in the following story of Bruce, an American finance attorney:

When we were sort of booking out our tour around New Zealand, one of the things they did ask us was whether we wanted to do a lot of Māori culture things. Originally our reaction was sort of like no because I think it’s based on our experience with native culture in the United States. That sort of indigenous culture stuff you get in the United States is very contrived and kind of hokey. And there is a little bit of feel of imperialism to it that you sort of…you are looking at this culture not as being immersed in it or really trying to understand it, but you are looking at it as being the outsider and ‘look isn’t that cute’. You are not; it makes you feel bad about it is the easy way of saying it.

Remarkably, the above interviewee did not relate to any cultural aspect in the initial narrative of his Te Papa visit. It was only after I asked him how he experienced New Zealand’s cultures at Te Papa that he started elaborating on this point in a deeper way.

The next section outlines museum practices which help visitors to overcome this feel of imperialism entrenched in their own discursive community, by facilitating the movement beyond the ‘outsider’s’ or ‘reader’s world’ towards an ‘immersed understanding’ of another world. Visitors’ stories provide insights into the journey from bicultural meanings to cross-cultural dialogue.

**From bicultural meanings to cross-cultural dialogue**

Pieterse (1997: 133) argues that self-representation is the ‘general guiding principle’ that realises the shift from a ‘colonial’ to a ‘cooperative’ museology. In Te Papa’s case Māori are seen to speak for themselves. The following story emphasizes the impact the perceived self-representation had on Bruce’s experience:

One of the cool things was that according to the tour guide it was basically presented by the Māori not by, you know, a bunch of white guys saying what we present of the Māori, which made a lot more tellable and believable and didn’t have this sort of stench of imperialism on it. So it made it a lot easier to sort of, because it’s, you know, if somebody is telling about themselves rather than somebody telling about somebody else, we call that hear-say in the law. So yeah that was pretty cool. You know I didn’t feel like there were a lot of people walking around in hokey costumes and what-not, which was good. It was nice to see what the tribal buildings looked like and, you know, at least some level of what the cultural artefacts kind of piece together to some extent. I guess based on the stories that the Māori put together for you.
Mediated by the tour host, Bruce dares to engage with another world after his initial refusal. He appreciates the self-representation of the Other which helps him overcoming the ‘feel of imperialism’. Now he is not looking at the Other but is ‘immersed’ in dialogue facilitating ‘understanding’ and erasing the ‘bad feeling’ of being an ‘outsider’. His position is reduced to the natural sense of Self in any inter-human encounter. Bruce continues:

There is some sort of indefinable hokeyness that in my experience tends to find its way or can find its way into presentations of non-dominant cultures or any culture really, I mean a non-present culture I guess is what I am talking about. I didn’t get the same idea or the same response here. And I don’t know whether that is just because the Māori culture is more alive right now than say the Native American cultures in the United States and still practicing Māori are still involved in it whereas in the United States there is not really, and I may be completely incorrect on this, but the sort of cultural understanding, the conventional wisdom is there is no real Native American culture left, it’s more or less been subsumed into the American culture.

It is obvious that the ‘reader’s world’, in this case the indigenous - non-indigenous discourses in the USA, frame Bruce’s bicultural meanings. However, far from being automatically determined he engages reflectively and critically with the Self through the Other. Strikingly, he departs from the specificity of the situation to assume a wider moral stance. He talks about ‘non-present cultures’ in general and links their alien representation to the ‘hear-say’ concept in the law, his own professional field. The multifacetedness of the stories show, in Davidson’s (2006: 165) words, how ‘narrative, identity and morality are irretrievably intertwined: without one another, they wither and die’.

We have seen in Bruce’s story that the tour host made Bruce realise the self-representation of Māori at Te Papa. The important function of human narrative intervention in the form of a guided tour to facilitate cross-cultural translation, dialogue and understanding is further supported by the following story of Michelle, a pensioner from the USA. Here she describes her experience of Te Papa’s contemporary Marae (communal meeting place):

My breath was taken away when I first saw it. I thought that was so beautiful. And then the docent told us an interesting use of it, that it actually is used when someone really important dies and the body is exhibited in there. I guess it was a director of the museum that died not long ago and his body was placed there as an honour. And I, I just thought that was really a wonderful way to honour the dead, to do it in that manner. So those stories were very interesting that the docent told us and, you know, she also told us all the symbolism in the actual structure of the ancient buildings.

Neither the ‘use’ nor the ‘symbolism’ of the Marae are yet cross-culturally translatable and thus understandable within the exhibition setting. This fact was addressed by incorporating such intangible concepts in tour programmes, especially when dealing with non-New Zealand audiences. It is remarkable that none of the interviewees referred to ‘taonga’, a treasure with living human links and integral part of Māori identity, when describing Māori objects, but instead used typical terms
associated with their interpretive communities such as ‘artefacts’ and ‘art’. At this point cross-cultural dialogue breaks down.

Michelle continues and shows us by referring to other museum experiences in New Zealand and the USA how a cross-cultural philosophy can be lived to its full potential - through the personalisation and humanisation of culture:

So when we can talk to, you know, a real person who was part of that culture, that was very significant to us, because they weren’t performing they were just being themselves, and being very straightforward and honest about all the things that were really significant in their lives. And you don’t get that kind of an opportunity very often...that was really quite memorable and I think it would be nice if they could do that in all museums, if they have a cultural exhibit, if they could have some people there who represented that culture and who would just talk with anyone who wanted to ask questions. But that very seldom happens I think in a museum. The only other way or the only other time I have done it is in Washington DC, there is a brand new museum called the Museum of the American Indian. I was there just after it opened, which was just a few years ago. And there were American Indian people who were leading the tours. And so they really personalised it, told you about their own family and their history as well as what was happening in the museum, and just made it so significantly, you know, more interesting I thought. Because they weren’t just talking about something that they have learned about, they were talking about something they lived. And I just, you know, felt that was very valuable.

I personally witnessed the most remarkable museum interaction at the Australian Museum when the Aboriginal artist Richard Campbell created contemporary art in the exhibition setting while actively engaging diverse audiences. But despite scholarly attention to embodied experiences (Cameron, 2006; Gregory and Witcomb, 2007), exhibitions mainly communicate in a detached and impersonal mode, failing to give ‘faces’ to the people involved. They continue to reify culture and difference, Self and Other.

Cross-cultural hermeneutics: the shifting Self

Ricoeur (1992) convincingly argues that otherness is not confined to another person, but instead reveals the various ways of ‘oneself as another’. To him, the ‘great kinds’ of Self and Other are ‘enjoined’. Combining Ricoeur’s argument informed by phenomenological hermeneutics with Bruner’s (1995:28) notion of the ‘Self’ as ‘the intersection of culture and individual identity’, we are able to establish a cross-cultural hermeneutics. In other words, cross-cultural dialogue is the ontological endeavour of what I call the shifting Self. To reinforce such an assertion we should follow the story of Andrew, a Canadian farmer and business man:

I think it was a significant part of the museum to me. I guess I have the Canadian definition of the Māori house, the greeting house, the house with all the hand-carved work around it. That was very, very impressive. I sort of equated it to the long house of the Iroquois in Canada. So I make the comparison between the two indigenous cultures.
As he proceeds we see how his Canadian Self shifts from the Indigenous to the Scottish inclusion through the experience of the New Zealand Other.

We were also very interested however in the section about the Scottish settlers right now. Again I can draw the connection because my family being from Scotland coming to Canada in the early 1800s. And stories were quite similar to what was recounted there.

Andrew continues his self-ethnography or ‘reflexive exoticism’ (Boomers, 2004) by shifting the cultural Self and Other to a personal and professional level.

I am a former politician so I am really interested in anything political. And gatherings of people from different places with tribal structures is a very political meeting. So I just found that fascinating and the fact that it’s still used for greeting visitors and used for important ceremonies, like the tour guide had mentioned funerals and weddings had been held there, and that’s very sentimental and meant a lot just to see that.

While describing his experience of a traditional Marae he now shifts his Self back to the cultural and equates himself with the Aboriginal Other within the Canadian ‘we’.

And I guess I am fairly interested in our own Aboriginal culture at home. And we, the Aboriginals in Canada would carve in cedar and we’ve got very few examples that have survived as well as that one.

This sense of the Canadian ‘we’ is realigned through contrasting himself with the Aboriginal Other within the Canadian Self. This again happens through the experience of the New Zealand Other leading to a cosmopolitan conclusion.

I noticed you have a similar problem here that we have at home, and that’s the number of Aboriginal land claims. A lot of Aboriginals here are claiming they were taken advantage of during the Treaty process and we have still got legal challenges going on. And I am not sure if the tour guide carries a prejudice into it, I don’t know, but it would have appeared to me from his explanations to us is that New Zealand is somewhat ahead of Canada in resolving these issues. And I just found it very interesting to know there was a similar concern going on in both parts of the world.

This ‘relativity of otherness’ (Dworschak, 1994), or the shifting sense of Self, is best summarised by Julia, a New Zealand born Australian, who started her interview by saying ‘it is interesting seeing it and being here through Australian eyes I think now instead of Kiwi eyes.’ But the artificial dichotomy of Self and Other is not only ‘destabilised by accelerated globalisation’, as Pieterse (1997: 125) argues. Careful analysis makes it clear that the historical Self is nothing other than the ‘generational figure of the Other’ (Ricoeur, 1992: 354). It is again Julia, who provides further evidence of this:

I am staying with mom and dad, so I am staying with a, you know, people in their seventies, and seeing people of the similar age group sort of thing. So you’ve still got the, their views and opinions and things which are, that came from my childhood, you know where my childhood views came from sort of thing. So I don’t know if that’s the same as what young people feel now? I haven’t had a chance to see people, you know, under forty, I don’t know if they feel, or maybe under thirty, a more inclusive or more acceptance of each other?!
We must accept that such cross-cultural dialogue, or the shifting nature of Self, will never operate without conflicts and controversy, as Sandahl (2008) reminds us. Embracing an agonistic sense of empathy would be a first step, but such discussion would go beyond the scope of this paper. For now I will conclude with a comment by Richard Campbell, the Aboriginal artist I referred to above, which highlights the crucial challenge ahead:

Well, you get them all the time, they say ‘our’, you know, ‘our Indians in America’ or ‘our African-Americans’, as if they own them, they are still a slave. That’s what I hate about people when they say things like that.

Conclusion
The research informing this paper is ongoing and long-term, which is a crucial requirement for understanding the context-dependent ‘endemic fluidity of meaning’ (Bauman, 1978: 229). At this stage of the research, the evolving suggestion is that cross-cultural encounter and dialogue are characterised by a shifting sense of Self through the Other, as opposed to a projection of Self on the Other exclusively determined by the discourse as claimed in much of the tourism literature (Bruner, 1991; Galani-Moutafi, 2000; Suvantola, 2002).

The study of human agency presented here via the narrative negotiation of Self-Other relationships, as demanded by Kraus (2006), emphasises the need to understand contemporary identity formations as never ending processes, what I call the shifting Self. Museological representation and praxis need to reflect such realities by regarding cross-cultural dialogue as a process instead of a goal (MAP for ID, 2009). This would enable the shift from a closed, reformist tolerance to an open, critical engagement. The above stories indeed reflect the critical nature of cross-cultural experiences and have facilitated the humanising ‘contact zones’, the exploration of theoretical notions through an empirical understanding of the individual. Potentially, a museum as a ‘contact zone’ might prove postmodern scepticism futile by creating a ‘third space’, which openly invites visitors to ‘cross the boundaries of belonging’, as Bodo (2007: 6) correctly argues, and treats individuals as they already are: ‘creators rather than consumers of identity’.

It has never been my intention to prove that all museum visitors would engage in such an endeavour. In fact, I have argued all along that any definition of the traveller or the museum visitor, even if backed up by empirical data, represents nothing more than what Laclau (2005: 71) aptly called an ‘empty signifier’ with ‘its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness.’ Instead, I followed Beck and Bonss’ (2001) call to explore new phenomena, such as cross-cultural encounters in a global context, through theoretically informed qualitative approaches leading towards a new cosmopolitan sociology. By shedding light on the narrative negotiation of articulations and demands as the proposed units of analysis, this research revealed the ‘faces’ and stories of cross-cultural dialogue.

Unsurprisingly, the cosmopolitan nature of the human experience has been branded as an elitist refashioning of cultural capital (Bennett, 2006). If all travellers are considered elitist, then it would be hard for me to disagree. In any case, I think such reductionist claims do great injustice to the individuals I interviewed by denying their critical agency beyond economic determinism. Habermas
(2006: 76) reminds us that the category ‘national’ represents ‘an abstract form of solidarity among strangers through a combination of the cultural symbolism of “the people” and the republican status of citizens.’ Citing Habermas’ (2006:87) cosmopolitan vision is the perfect way to conclude:

If this artificial form of ‘solidarity among strangers’ owes its existence to a historically momentous advance in abstraction from local to dynastic consciousness to national and democratic consciousness, why then should it not be possible for this learning process to continue beyond national borders?

Bibliography


