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Re-Visiting the Contact Zone:

Museums, Theory, Practice

Paper

Contact Zones, Third Spaces, and the act of interpretation

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**Introduction**

The conceptual understanding of museums as ‘contact zones’ has been widely appropriated in the museum literature and beyond. But the discussion lacks empirical insights: What does ‘contact’ mean? How is it lived, negotiated and contested? Drawing on a long-term narrative study of global visitors to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), this paper addresses these crucial questions by offering an empirical interrogation and theoretical refinement of the ‘contact zone’. It moves beyond the conceptual vision’s initial focus on museological production by shedding light on the meanings made by visitors.

**Theoretical framework**

Clifford’s ‘contact zone’ (1997) concludes with the problem of ‘translation’. Bhabha (1994) in return theorises this ‘translation’ as ‘moments’ or ‘processes’ in the ‘articulation of cultural differences’, and provides a distinctive and particularly useful perspective on ‘cultural action’ (Clifford, 1997) in ‘contact zones’ paving the way from the physical place of encounter to the discursive space of dialogue. Bhabha (1994, p. 2) expands on the border experience, the ‘liminal space’, and illuminates the ‘interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference’ which are further magnified in the ‘cosmopolitanised’ (Beck, 2006) life world of our time. By offering ‘cultural difference as an enunciative category’, Bhabha (1994, p. 60) opens a hermeneutic terrain of cultural negotiation and contestation without resorting to the last bastion of binary oppositions, which are produced by the immanently essentialising concept ‘culture’ itself. With the help of Bhabha (1994, p. 36), I can lay the theoretical foundation for the empirical exploration of ‘cultural action’ as ‘interpretive contests’ (Said, 2003) and their ‘articulation’ or ‘enunciation’ in ‘contact zones’:

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilised in the passage through a Third Space.
The intervention of the ‘Third Space’, Bhabha (1994, p. 37) continues, ‘makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process’, which echoes the hermeneutic phenomenon of ‘polysemy’ (Ricoeur, 1981) and exposes any claim of cultural purity as an impossibility even before unearthing empirical evidence. Consequently, ‘the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity’, Bhabha (1994, p. 37) further argues, ‘even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew’. In other words, there is no a priori in the ‘mind-constructed world’ (Dilthey, 1976) apart from the mind itself. Further inspecting the dialogical ‘processes’, Bhabha (1994, p. 228) concludes that the ‘moment’ of ‘translation’ is the ‘movement of meaning’. ‘Translation’ embodies the ‘performative nature of cultural communication’ which works through the ‘continua of transformation’ (Benjamin in Bhabha, 1994). But how can we empirically dissect the ‘processes’ in the ‘articulation of cultural differences’?

Methodological framework

I argue for a narrative construction of meaning and Self through discursive actions, movements and performances. Consequently, the research informing this paper required hermeneutics as methodological choice and interpretation as its analytical method. By employing narrative hermeneutics, I shed light on the dynamic interrelation and interdependence of ‘action’, ‘narrative’, ‘meaning’ and ‘Self’ while humanising Te Papa as a ‘contact zone’ through ethnographic research on global visitors and their acts of interpretation.

A narrative hermeneutics allows us, in my view, to investigate the relationship between the psychic and the social as mutually constitutive dimensions of any interpretive performance (Redman, 2005). By illuminating these ‘spiralling exchanges’ and their ‘inescapable
hybridity’ (Redman, 2005), I argue that without using formalist and deterministic reductions we can find answers to the open question ‘why it is that certain individuals occupy some subject positions rather than others’ (Hall, 1996, p. 10). I concur with Hall (1996, p. 14), who stresses the remaining ‘requirement to think this relation of subject to discursive formations as an articulation’, or more specifically a narrative articulation. Such processual understanding of discursive engagements shifts the analytical focus from identities as essential traits to ‘identifications’ as positional and strategic performances (Hall, 1996). Butler (2000a, p. 149; 171) elaborates that ‘no identification is reducible to identity’ and reminds us once again that there exists ‘no single structure or a single lack that underscores all discursive formations. Our exile in heterogeneity is, in this sense, irreversible.’

In this study, I explored the heterogeneous ‘articulations’ and ‘identifications’ expressed through the ‘narrative negotiation’ and ‘performative construction’ of Self (Kraus, 2006). This enabled me to humanise such abstract totalities such as ‘culture’ and ‘politics’ to ‘encounter humanity face to face’ avoiding that ‘living detail is drowned in dead stereotype’ (Geertz, 1973, p. 53; 51). Having translated the theoretical into a methodological framework, I continue with the empirical findings in the following section.

Cross-cultural journeys

I turn to Julia, a New Zealand born Australian, to shed light on the hermeneutic complexity of cross-cultural encounters:

*I loved the Māori side of it and it’s wonderful to see that strength there. I mean I look at the Aborigines in Australia and it’s a totally different culture, you can’t compare that, but I think the Māori are in a lot better position as a race in New Zealand than the Aborigines are over there. And I think, yeah Australia has got a lot of work to do really in that regard…And I loved the modern side of it as well, like the meeting house down there with all the pretty colors in it and made not out of traditional wood, that was just beautiful. Because to me that shows more integration, it’s showing New*
Zealand as being an integrated country, like we are not talking Māori and Pakeha, we are talking about Kiwis or New Zealanders, which is really good too... It was good to see that side of it, but that didn’t dominate. It’s a small part of this museum and this is giving it a more, I don’t know, inclusive feel.

Julia, like any human being, cannot help but place her cultural experience in a context informed by her own discursive environment, the ‘reader’s world’ (Bauman, 1978). Consequently, the perceived integration of Māori and European in New Zealand is related to the apparently worse position of the Aboriginal population in Australia. The fact that Julia, as a New Zealand born Australian, is intimately familiar with the socio-cultural situations in both countries attests to the phenomenon of ‘traveling cultures’ (Clifford, 1997) in a ‘cosmopolitised’ (Beck, 2006) world which goes far beyond the travel encounters interrogated in this study and undermines the imaginary purity of any cultural ‘reader’s world’. Importantly, Julia highlights the advance of the emotive dimension into the cultural domain manifesting itself as an “inclusive feel”.

The engagement with cultural displays can be affected, limited or even prevented by a visitor’s interpretive community, the ‘reader’s world’. This becomes apparent in the following story of Bruce from the USA:

*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.*

We accompany Bruce as he reflects on his visit to Te Papa and discover an interpretive pathway which transforms a ‘contact zone’ into a dialogical ‘Third Space’. Bruce undertakes the journey from bicultural meanings to cross-cultural dialogue:
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 if somebody is telling about themselves rather than somebody telling about somebody else, we call that hear-say in the law.

Mediated by the tour host, Bruce dares to engage with another world after his initial reluctance. He appreciates the self-representation of the cultural Other, which enables him to overcome the “feel of imperialism”. Now he is “not looking at” the Other but is “immersed” in dialogue facilitating “understand[ing]” and dissolving the “bad…feel[ing]” of being an “outsider”. It is the ‘moment’ or ‘process’ which translates a ‘contact zone’ into ‘the production of meaning’. This ‘requires that these two places…the I and the You…be mobilised in the passage through a Third Space’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36), the ‘pact of interpretation’ or ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer in Ricoeur, 1991) through museological self-representation.

Andrew from Canada offers more insights into the interpretive dynamics and hermeneutic negotiations between Self and Other within the discursive museum space:

\[I \text{ think it was a significant part of the museum to me. I guess I have the Canadian definition of the Māori house, the greeting house, the house with all the hand-carved work around it. That was very, very impressive. I sort of equated it to the long house of the Iroquois in Canada. So I make the comparison between the two indigenous cultures.}\]

As Andrew proceeds we see how his Canadian Self shifts from the Indigenous to the Scottish inclusion through the experience of the New Zealand Other within the wider context of ‘traveling cultures’:

\[We \text{ were also very interested however in the section about the Scottish settlers right now. Again I can draw the connection because my family being from Scotland coming to Canada in the early 1800s. And stories were quite similar to what was recounted there...the similarities between the Scottish settlements in Canada and the Scottish settlements here is just amazing. I think there are probably more Scots spread around the world than there are left in Scotland now... and it’s something that}\]
people are trying to keep their heritage alive I guess. And I just found it really interesting, the same things happen here that happen at home.

Andrew carries on by shifting the cultural Self/Other encounter 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 are 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 (or Māori ceremonial space) 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.

The sense of the Canadian “we” is realigned through contrasting himself with the Aboriginal Other within the Canadian Self. This happens again through the experience of the New Zealand Other which leads 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.

Andrew’s cross-cultural journey is characterised not only by the opening towards the Other but by a shifting sense of Self. The ‘cosmopolitanised’ condition of our time forces and enables Julia “seeing it and being here through Australian eyes…instead of Kiwi eyes”. It causes Michelle to identify as both Armenian and American and leads to Andrew’s ‘multiple loyalties’ (Beck, 2006), the shifting Self which corresponds to an endemic relativity of otherness.
Conclusion

Visitors’ voyages culminated in a ‘Cross-cultural hermeneutics: the shifting Self’. The research material supported my argument that cross-cultural dialogue was processed not only through the opening towards the Other but through the interpretive ontological endeavour of what I termed the shifting Self. Importantly, the associated multiple identifications subjected otherness to an endemic relativity and transformed the ‘neither/nor’ dilemma of a ‘hybrid Third Space’ into a ‘both/and’ prospect of what I called a pluralist cosmopolitan space. This discursive terrain for the interpretive negotiations of a cross-cultural hermeneutics was characterised by a twofold movement of the frame of reference: the simultaneously expanding ‘cosmopolitanised’ horizon and contracting humanisation of culture through ‘stories’ and ‘faces’.

In my view, the conceptual understanding of the shifting Self offers the clearest mirror of contemporary identity formations. In a ‘cosmopolitanised’ world, identities in their ethnographic sense are neither purely essential and coherent nor completely fragmented and fluid, as the dualistically opposed perspectives claim. The inescapable mixing of ‘traveling cultures’ requires us to shift between discursive positions, a simultaneously transient and continuous task. This interpretive ontological endeavour finds its expression in a ‘situational localisation’ (Boomers, 2004) of the Self. In other words, Self and Other, us and them, are articulated from a certain perspective until changing situations and circumstances provoke new ‘moments’ and ‘processes’ of selfing and othering. To put it succinctly, the sense of Self is at once both coherent and fluid – it is shifting.

Scholars of museum studies have pondered ‘third spaces’ (Bodo, 2008), ‘the cosmopolitan museum’ (Kreuzzieger, 2008), ‘integrated diversity’ (Sandell, 2007) and the ‘shift from
discourse about others to discourse about othering’ (Pieterse, 1997, p. 141). All these perspectives represent important pieces of the overall puzzle of a pluralist cosmopolitan space which shapes and strengthens our ‘inner mobility’ (Beck, 1997) to meet the daily challenges of a life ‘in-between’ differing, overlapping and contradictory worlds. In my view, museums are unique places to unearth and stimulate the ‘moments or processes…in the articulation of cultural differences’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1) sabotaging the reductionist trap of binary oppositions and melting the iron grid of an ‘ethnic structuralism’ (Williams, 2003).

The pluralist cosmopolitan space emerging from the research material offered a discursive remedy for the pain of chronic ‘underreading’ in cultural characterisations and even eroded the ‘untranslatable’ (Bhabha, 1994) leading to ‘higher forms of understanding’ (Dilthey, 1976) without being trapped in the reformist projects of tolerance and diversity.

The empirical evidence of this research, which I could only touch on in this paper, emphasised that the humanisation of abstract totalities such as ‘people’, ‘history’ and ‘culture’ rendered possible the moral and political engagement between Self and Other. Only the existence of political and moral actors, their stories and faces, could create the discursive conditions of a pluralist cosmopolitan space for the negotiation and contestation of differences, commonalities and understandings. Here, as Arendt (2006, p. 23) insists, ‘freedom as the political way of life begins’. ‘The actual content of freedom’, Arendt (2006, p. 22) continues, ‘is participation in public affairs, or admission to the public realm’. In this research, I have shown that a museum such as Te Papa functions as a forum or discursive terrain facilitating the formation and ‘enunciation’ of opinions. Arendt (2006, p. 217) warns us, however, that there is a ‘decisive incompatibility between the rule of a unanimously held ‘public opinion’ and freedom of opinion’. Only the latter can achieve ‘political freedom’ (Arendt, 2006) and the ‘de-universalisation of political subjects’ breaking ‘with all forms of
essentialism’ (Mouffe, 1999, p. 754). In other words, a humanised pluralism is the fundamental precondition of ‘the political’. These are the *stories and faces of a pluralist cosmopolitan space*. 
Bibliography


