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Full paper:

*Humanising global public spheres:*

*A narrative exploration of a museum forum*

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Introduction

The reinvention of the museum as ‘forum’ in the new museology and the notion of the ‘public sphere’ are inextricably linked. Both concepts have been widely theorised and intellectually scrutinised, with most favouring a democratic domain governed by reason and rational debate. But what does it mean to experience a museological space and how is a public sphere negotiated and lived within time and space?

This paper explores this question empirically by drawing on a long-term narrative study of global visitors to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa). It argues that the individual is the point of departure for humanising the site of the ‘museum’ as a particular public sphere by giving it stories and ‘faces’. The hermeneutic analysis of the research material reveals a narrative trajectory linking the individual’s experience of the museum space, their shifting sense of Self-Other relationships and the resulting articulations of political opinions and moral demands. The empirical evidence highlights the ubiquitous presence of emotions within the lived experience and therefore in human life: highlighted in a shift from sensual perception to political opinion formation.

Based on the research findings, this paper argues that the ‘museum forum’ can be theorised as a narrative space of a political nature. It is characterised by circular and interdependent relationships and constitutes a focal point for the reciprocal negotiation and interpretation of identities via narratives. Instead of continuing to reify culture and difference, Self and Other, the museum forum can humanise and personalise such abstract totalities as the culture, the history or the people. Shifting the frame of reference to the individual enables audiences to engage morally and
politically with multiple perspectives. This facilitates the move from prescribed ethical conventions to free moral responsibility and from democratic representation to free political participation. The museum forum can thus help to achieve what scholars have recently called ‘performative democracy’ (Chakrabarty, 2002; Weibel & Latour, 2007).

Theoretical framework: Museums and the public sphere

The ‘museum’ is a relatively new object of academic analysis. It has been appropriated by a myriad of related disciplines so that research tends to operate in discursive cycles producing essentialised categories such as the museum, the culture, the state or the visitor. Abstract concepts like ‘discourse’ and ‘structure’ assume the obscure and all dominating role of an ‘invisible actor behind the scenes’ (Arendt, 1958) leading to an ‘emanatist vision’ (Bourdieu, 1990) which reduces historical subjects to incidents of discourse and embodiments of structure.

The main reason for such simplistic accounts is a misunderstanding of ‘hegemony’ which leads to confusion about ‘the political’. By reading museums as cultural texts and hegemonic extensions of the reformist agenda and citizenry technology of the state, such perspectives fail to consider whether hegemony is not in fact a totalising frame but possibly an inherently contested terrain (Laclau, 2000). In other words, the state itself is a heterogeneous and relational complex and, in the case of New Zealand, there are indigenous and other agencies at work within the state and its institutions like museums. Consequently, culture and politics cannot be seen as linear, normative prescriptions but instead as dynamic, hermeneutic contestations.
Discussions of the ‘public sphere’ usually start with Habermas (1989) and ‘The structural transformation of the public sphere’. The title itself indicates that again a singular and unitary structure is the point of departure leading to an assumed ‘invisible actor behind the scenes’. Although still influential and useful, Habermas’ idea has been extensively critiqued, with later scholars stressing a plurality of ‘competing counterpublics’ (Fraser, 1993) or a ‘public of publics’ (Bohman, 2004). Further refining such a line of thought, political theorists Laclau (2005) and Butler (2000) remind us that political identities, which Habermas thought of only in the bourgeois sense, are not determined by an a priori structural logic but are instead the outcome of concrete processes and practices among heterogeneous elements.

Another limiting aspect of Habermas’ view is the quality of political discourse itself. To envisage an unconstrained rational debate requires the ‘bracketing of differences’ (Fraser, 1993) but this remains an abstract illusion which fails to address what ‘the political’ actually means. In her plea for an ‘agonistic pluralism’, Mouffe (1999) stresses that the political is never free of power and antagonism. Passions, which Habermas considers impediments to an ideal speech situation and rational consensus, are in fact the ontological basis of any political engagement as we shall see in this paper. Consequently, the required ‘self-abstraction’ (Warner, 1993) could never grasp the unavoidable ontological dimension of identity politics which is characterised by ‘discursive contestation’ (Fraser, 1993) rather than ‘deliberation’ (Habermas, 1999).

**Methodological framework: A worldmaking approach to a public sphere**

The anthology *The phantom public sphere* edited by Robbins (1993) facilitates a much needed shift in thinking about politics and the public sphere ‘from substance to
movement’, as Weibel & Latour (2007) rightly summarise. It opens the door to ‘world-making’ by emphasising that ‘the production of new culture is as important as inheritance’ and that, as Calhoun (2002, p. 148) argues, the ‘distinctions between the two are less clear than common usage implies’. According to Calhoun (2002, p. 152; 154), ‘world-making is a way of approaching culture that emphasises agency and history’ and ‘it is precisely the kind of question of personal identity that produces passions that escape conventional categories of the political’, as I have argued above. Calhoun’s (2002, p. 158) demand creates an appropriate transition to my approach to the public sphere:

The key is to reject the notion – which nationalist ideologies indeed commonly assert – that the cultural conditions of public life, including both individual and collective identities, are established prior to properly public discourse itself.

To put it succinctly, there exists no independent a priori logic of reified structures, systems and substances emanating from some divine ground. Instead, cultural politics are constituted through interpretive actions, movements and performances.

But how is this public sphere experienced, lived and performed? What does identity politics mean? To explore these crucial questions I draw on Arendt (1958, p. 198) who states:

…the political realm arises directly out of acting together, the “sharing of words and deeds.” Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it.

Arendt (1958, p. 178) further argues that ‘most acts are performed in the manner of speech’. In fact, an act without speech loses its subject and thus becomes mechanical.
Departing from such an assertion, which puts narrative and action at the heart of the human condition, I am able to lay out the methodological framework of this study. For my PhD thesis I interviewed twelve global visitors to Te Papa, four each from Australia, Canada and the USA, at the time of their visit and six months later via phone to explore their experience of biculturalism (the relationship between Māori and Pakeha or European) in New Zealand’s national museum Te Papa. I have made extensive use of narrative interviews with these visitors.

Narrative, in Bhabha’s (2008, p. 45) words ‘that peculiar intersection of words and actions’, provides me with the tool to shed light on the complex dynamics of interpretive worldmaking. This allows for the humanisation of Te Papa as a particular global public sphere by imbuing the visitor experience with the stories and faces of actual visitors. In this research I have employed hermeneutics in order to treat ‘culture’, ‘identities’, ‘politics’ and the ‘public sphere’ as interpretive actions, movements and performances and not simply as unitary and totalised abstractions. In short, I illuminate Clifford’s (1997) notion of ‘cultural action’ in the form of ‘interpretive contests’ (Said, 2003) and their ‘enunciation’ (Bhabha, 1994) through a narrative exploration of the research material in the following analysis.

The experience of a museum space

The narrative journey of the research participants starts out with the experience of space, a fundamental characteristic of the human condition. Wherever we are and whatever we do, our life is always experienced within spatial and temporal parameters. Here are the words of one of the key informants, Susan from the USA, at the beginning of her interview:
...it’s such an amazing beautiful building...I liked how it’s set up in different rooms, but you don’t feel like you are in a confined area. It seemed to feel like you are in a big open area...You just kind of walk in and you walk right into an exhibit and then you walk upstairs and you have your exhibits and everything kind of branches off and kind of goes smoothly from one place into another. And I liked that...

Susan’s Te Papa visit starts with a feeling, a spatial feeling. Both the generous spatial layout and the flowing relationship between individual exhibition spaces provoke an emotive response. Such primordial bodily movement within the material world is a ‘good way to start our account of meaning-making’, as Johnson (2007) argues, and during the course of this paper we will witness the ‘growth of meaning’ through embodied engagements. This attests to Dewey’s (1934, p. 13) observation that ‘life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it’.

By following Nicole from Canada, we gain further insights into the spatial dynamics of the human experience:

...the other thing that I find, if there weren’t all those walls there it would be really chaotic I think. But the walls kind of mitigate the chaos, like they separate. Once you walk in yes, there is a lot going on. But if you are just standing in the middle of the fourth floor it seems really calm and you are not caught up in everything that’s going on because the walls kind of block that, if you know what I mean?!...yeah I think just how everything is laid out it makes sense that on the fourth floor there is the Māori and then the immigrant section as well. And it’s just kind of all together in one area so in that way like the layout makes sense to me.

Nicole narrates on spatial arrangements which pacify environments, “mitigate the chaos” and “make sense”. At this point, space becomes an interpretive agent ‘active in the making of meaning’ (MacLeod, 2005, p. 1). This highlights the mutual dependence of thematic content and spatial form, what we tell and how we tell it,
within human communication. The museum space acts as a medium in dialogue with the visitor and becomes an integral part of interpretative processes.

In the follow-up interview six months after his visit, Jack from Canada carries the discussion from the broader exhibition space into the realm of a particular display and its juxtaposition:

*The thing that still stands out most for me, when I think of it that comes immediately to mind was the Treaty of Waitangi exhibit, which I found extremely good, very memorable in both its presentation and very helpful in its information... And it just creates a whole, there is a great ambience in that area...I found the exhibit itself very impressive, very accessible, like it has a bit of majesty to it in the way it is presented. But very accessible to read and one of the very clearest understandings or explanations of the treaty and how the variations have occurred between the English and Māori version, what happened there and why is it still contentious. I just thought that was very well explained.*

We can observe once again the dynamic interplay of “presentation” and “information”, or form and content, within interpretive processes and its impact on the making of meaning and memory. The exhibition’s monumental character, its sense of “majesty”, thereby runs the risk of turning into an indoctrinating symbol which ‘discourages scepticism’ (Williams, 2003, p. 249) and forecloses any critical engagement. However, this potential ideological threat of interpellation, which mostly remains a generalised theoretical assumption as empirical studies have shown (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995), does not prevent Jack from drawing his main conclusion: “it is still contentious”.

The comments of Claudia, also from Canada, brings to a close this brief discussion of the experience of museum space:

*So when I walked into an exhibit, like the Blood, Earth & Fire, and the red lava spewing and you can hear the sounds of things erupting, it just really (paused) makes me more aware of what they are trying to get me to*
understand. The one with the earthquake simulation, it just really adds to the experience. It’s one thing to watch videos or to read about something or, you know, see the lava rocks that may have been the result after the thing. But to be given the chance to try to comprehend what it really sounded like, felt like, smelled like for me as a person, I don’t know if everyone would feel the same way (paused), but once you are trying to experience it firsthand, and even though it’s a simulation, it may be the closest thing an individual may get to experiencing it...so it gives me an opportunity to get a sense of what it may be like. And just it broadens my understanding of what occurs when there is an earthquake for example and what people might go through and how the people would feel. So maybe at home when I go back like watching the news and I hear about an earthquake I won’t just discount it. I will actually be able to appreciate that piece of news because it’s something that I’ve now more information, more internal understanding of.

Although Claudia does not “know if everyone would feel the same way”, I am convinced that any “person” can somehow relate to her story and reflected experience: we can never help but feel! Claudia’s narration exemplifies that an interpretive context can be achieved through multi-sensory and embodied performances, a sensory and emotive contextualisation leading to an “internal understanding” and empathy. This “internal understanding” cannot be exhausted by linguistic expressions transcending its bodily anchoring. At least to a certain extent, it will always remain a felt rather than a spoken experience, meaning and understanding. It requires a hermeneutics which is sensitive to more than just words.

These spheres: the interplay and tension of form and content as well as the multisensory, emotive and embodied nature of the museum experience represent conditions of meaning-making leading to subsequent interpretive processes of meaning-making, the ‘growth of meaning’ (Johnson, 2007) and ‘development of understanding’ (Ricoeur, 1981). The relationship between the conditions and processes of meaning-making is constantly performed and mediated in a circular
hermeneutic way. Being means feeling, understanding and interpreting as we will further observe in the following section on cross-cultural journeys.

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 ‘cosmopolitanised’ (Beck, 2006a) 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.

As we listen to Bruce talk about his visit to the museum, we detect a pathway which facilitates the movement beyond the “outsider’s” or ‘reader’s world’ towards an “immersed understanding” of another world. This insights helps overcome the “feel of imperialism” entrenched in one’s own discursive environment. 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 refusal. He appreciates the self-representation of the cultural Other which provokes the ‘moment’ or ‘process’ that transforms a ‘contact zone’ (Clifford, 1997) into a discursive ‘Third Space’ (Bhabha, 1994). The dialogical encounter of Self and Other ‘requires that these two places be mobilised in the passage through a Third Space’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36), the ‘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 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 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) his Self shifts back to the cultural and he 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 the interpretive ontological endeavour of what I call the 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, 2006a), the shifting Self which corresponds to an endemic relativity of otherness. In the follow section, a heightened Self-reflexivity offers moments of critique and traces of transformation which politicise and moralise the discursive museum space.

Political opinions and moral demands

Julia’s ‘cosmopolitanised’ biography of ‘multiple loyalties’ provides interpretive evidence of the inevitability of ‘both/and’ (Beck, 2006b) associations in a world of ‘traveling cultures’ and multiple Selves and Others:

I don't know, is that a pride in that you can see the country of your birth is sort of come together, got its act together on one level!? Maybe that’s what it is, I don’t know!?... I mean, no way that this place is perfect but there is still a feel, a better inclusiveness.
As Julia continues, we see how the “feel” of “inclusiveness” in her “country of...birth” is relativised even within the nuclear realm of her own family:

I am staying with mom and dad, people in their seventies and seeing people of the similar age group sort of thing. So you’ve still got their views and opinions and things that came from my childhood, you know, where my childhood views came from. 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 under forty. I don’t know if they feel, or maybe under thirty, a more inclusive or more acceptance of each other?! And also I guess younger people have had the chance to be brought up with the education, the using both languages and stuff. So maybe it’s just a matter of time as it grows through?!...I mean everywhere you go, to hop on the cable car or whatever, it’s just this relaxed attitude and so helpful. And there doesn’t seem to be any big deal of whether you are Māori or Pakeha or whoever. It doesn’t matter. When I grew up it was very much, you know, ‘don’t go there!’ And you don’t realise it at the time. It’s not until you walk away or get away from that attitude that you can re-assess it I guess.

Julia emphasises that her “childhood views” were the product of her parents’ “views and opinions”. While these still claim validity among “people in their seventies”, Julia speculates that it might not be “the same as what young people feel now” due to perceivable changes in life. The artificial dichotomy of Self and Other is thus not only ‘destabilised by accelerated globalisation’, as Pieterse (1997, p. 125) argues. Careful analysis makes it clear that the historical Self is nothing other than the ‘generational figure of the Other’(Ricoeur, 1992, p. 354). The cultural sense of Self shifts in the course of generational progression and thereby subjects otherness to an endemic relativity. In the case of Julia, it required a change in time and space to re-evaluate cross-cultural relations. “You don’t realise it at the time”, she says, and “it’s not until you walk away...from that attitude that you can re-assess it“.

The interpretive ontological endeavour of the shifting Self assumes the character of an ongoing self-reflexive ethnography, as we can also witness in the case of fellow Australian Mike who reminisces on the stories of history in his follow-up interview:
I think the story was better told...the new world has all got stories of a new migrant and the indigenous population. The story told there is a little bit clearer and perhaps a little more honest than some of the other ones that I have seen. I mean in America for instance it’s hard to find a linkage between the destruction of the Indian and the press to go west to open up land is not always necessarily linked together. And it made me think a little bit about where Australia is at with its Aboriginal. I guess it’s not only its perception but its history and how its history is doled out. I mean history is written by people and often it’s doled out to the reader or to the audience in a particular fashion at particular points of time quite differently. For instance when I was at school there was no concept that we, the white man, had done anything wrong whatsoever in the country. Now you start to see museums like yours and it pricks the conscience of that there is two sides of the story. And I don’t think we still haven’t got two sides of the story in Australia. They are often quite separated. You know we are quite proud of indigenous culture in painting and whatnot, but on the other hand we don’t really want to acknowledge the destruction of a culture at the same time.

Mike emphasises the inherently hermeneutic quality of history. He reinforces this insight by observing commonalities and differences across the ‘cosmopolitanised’ “new world”. Importantly, Mike stresses that “history is written by people”. The “history book” is no prescription by an ‘invisible actor behind the scenes’ (Arendt, 1958) nor an ‘emanatist vision’ (Bourdieu, 1990) but a purely human product.

According to Mike, the visit to Te Papa “made me think” and reflect upon the “we”, “the white man” in Australia. The museum “story...pricks the conscience” and thus provokes a new ‘mental state’ which itself ‘represents a new attitude, a new relation of the whole person to things and people’ (Dilthey, 1976, p. 202). This is the ‘moment’ or ‘process’ of structural ‘renewal’ (Taylor, 1991) when interpretive agency changes discourse from within. In doing so, abstract categories such as ‘history’ and ‘culture’ are humanised creating what I call a pluralist cosmopolitan space. As scholars have also pointed out, “history is written by people” (Ricoeur, 1981; Said, 2003; Sartre, 1976). Everybody assumes a different ‘mental state’ or interpretive position. What Arendt (1958, p. 175) calls ‘human plurality’, is ‘the basic condition of
both action and speech’. To put it differently, there is no alternative to discursive pluralism within the hermeneutic negotiations of a cosmopolitan space.

Conclusion

The empirical evidence in this study highlighted the ubiquitous presence of cultural feelings which are largely ignored in conventional approaches to cultural studies, not least museum visitor studies. The ‘complex prism which is culture’ (Featherstone in Clifford, 1997) is mostly reduced and reified in a naïve fashion producing significant shortcomings in our understanding of identity politics. In contrast, I conclude that being means feeling, understanding, interpreting and contesting.

In this paper, I have only been able to discuss an aspect of my overall research project. Nevertheless this brief narrative exploration of Te Papa as a global public sphere has revealed the hermeneutic actions, movements and performances of a pluralist cosmopolitan space. In the thesis I am writing based on this research, I argue that museums need to humanise such abstract categories as the culture, the people and the history to lay bare the relativity of otherness. This approach can potentially open the doors to political and moral engagement and avoid the illusionary totality ‘public opinion’ which, as Arendt (2006, p. 218) argues, ‘kills true opinions everywhere’.

Research like this offers insights into the complex dynamics of cultural worldmaking. It allows us to move beyond over-theorised perspectives and reified abstractions. In my view, such understandings are crucial to revitalise the moral and political engagements in discursive spaces like museums. This facilitates the translation of ‘performative democracy’ from theoretical pondering into vibrant praxis.


