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Affecting Heritage:
Revisiting the geographies and politics of heritage through affect and emotion

_Humanising migration: museum, faces, stories_

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Introduction

Although museums have shown an increased interest in the discursively contested issue of ‘migration’, there is, apart from a few exceptions (Dodd, Jones, Sawyer, & Tseliou, 2012; Smith, 2013), a paucity of research on visitors’ experiences of migration exhibitions. This paper sets out to investigate the interpretive experience or hermeneutics of migration through the meaning-making processes of museum visitors to the Immigration Museum Melbourne (IMM). Drawing on a long-term narrative study of Australian visitors to the IMM, the paper provides ethnographic insights into the museum’s functions as a ‘shrine’ of remembrance and therapeutic remedy that entangles meaning and memory in a complex web of interpretive negotiations. The museum offers, as I argue, a mirror of the Self and window to the Other, entangling both sides of the same coin through the ‘stories’ and bodies of migration. The empirical evidence suggests that approaches to the museological production of migration that emphasise human experiences through ‘faces’ and ‘stories’ render possible a moral and political engagement. By ‘making things public’ (Latour & Weibel, 2005), I argue that a museum might offer a space and place to draw the migrating cultural body into the political, thus shaping a refined literacy of an often impoverished language of agency.

Background: Museums and migration

In Australia, where the colonial clash has produced such stark contrasts as between Indigeneity and ‘White Australia Policy’, the issue of ‘migration’ appears to be a particularly contested terrain in which political bickering conceals historical understandings and abandons moral responsibilities. Here, British imperial expansion culminating in the ‘discovery’ of a supposedly unpopulated Terra Nullius, a legal construct which has since been overturned through ‘Western’ re-interpretations of ‘Indigenous’ law, is mostly celebrated and seen as being outside of other contemporary forms of migration caused by war, environmental
disaster and economic realities, thus ignoring its own historical anchoring in processes of colonial migration. While Australia eagerly embraces the global horizon of economic and financial markets through the simultaneous engagement with its European ‘origin’, its long-standing US American ally and its growing position in the ‘Asian century’, the ‘lucky country’ quickly retreats to ‘paranoid nationalism’ (Hage, 2003) in the political establishment and ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 1980) in the media landscape when facing the invasive threat of ‘boat people’, thereby constructing refugees and asylum seekers as ‘illegal immigrants’ and even ‘terrorists’ (Jacobs, 2011). Migration, then, might be discursively constructed as a much needed impetus for a so-called multicultural nation of immigrants or as a threat to national security and economic wellbeing.

Museums, as particular institutional settings where academic and political perspectives collide and intertwine, are emblematic of these discursive dynamics involved in the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of the meanings of migration. Within the Australian context, Andrea Witcomb (2009) offers a historical trajectory of Australian migration exhibitions, from the liberal tradition of celebrating diversity, encapsulated by the ‘enrichment narrative’ (McShane, 2001) in which the focus is on the contribution made by non-Anglo-Celtic migrants to Australian culture and their ‘rebirth’ (McShane, 2001) supposedly experienced after arriving on the Antipodean Anglo-Celtic shores, to socio-politically and historically contextualised approaches.

**Studying the experience of migration at the Immigration Museum Melbourne**

The Immigration Museum Melbourne (IMM), founded in 1998, offers an interesting case to study how the discursive construction of migration in exhibition spaces is *experienced* by visitors. The IMM has been praised for its simultaneous tackling of individual migrant
experiences and their meanings as well as wider socio-political and historical contexts of migration (Witcomb, 2009). In the exhibition Identity – Yours, Mine, Ours, the museum has shifted its discursive focus from ‘migration’ and its history to ‘cultural diversity’ and its significance in contemporary Australia, a strategic move that will also be reflected in the revised collection policy currently being developed. The staff focus group, which I conducted as part of this study and will introduce below, highlighted the difficulties of such an institutional shift and the associated movement from the representation of ‘stories’ to a ‘conversation’ around ‘issues’.

Ethnographic research has shown how visitors appropriate the IMM for ‘memory and identity work’ (Smith, 2013). This paper, then, offers more empirical insights into how visitors to the museum experience migration and engage in dialogue or ‘conversation’ with the discursive museum space. That is, the ‘issues’ of migration are often not confined to museological representations but have been personally experienced by a large share of visitors to the IMM.¹ It turned out that this study’s informants, while identifying themselves as Australians, have all been affected by migratory experiences in one way or another, even without such a sampling focus. Both sides of the same coin, museum and visitor biographies, then, are intertwined by narratives of migration and the associated ‘existential movement’ (Hage, 2005) and endemic emerging, making and ‘becoming’ of migrating lives ‘in-between’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). By humanising migration through interpretive movements (Schorch, 2013a) and narrative meanings (Schorch, forthcoming 2014), this paper sheds more ethnographic light on these hermeneutic processes.

¹ According to the IMM visitor profile, 49% of visitors from Melbourne were born overseas and have parents who were also born overseas, 15% were born in Australia and have parents born overseas, and 36 % were born in Australia and have parents also born in Australia.
In December 2012, I conducted eight narrative interviews with a total of twelve interviewees, four each with individuals and pairs of adults\(^2\), after their visit to the IMM at one of the education rooms. I followed a narrative interview structure (Wengraf, 2001), which elicits narratives about visitors’ experiences as they have been experienced and limits the researcher’s intervention by responding rather than directing. I recorded and transcribed the interviews, and used the ‘zoom model’ (Pamphilon, 1999) of narrative analysis, focussing on the different levels of narratives and the multiple layers of meaning and context. A prior focus group with staff members, which I mentioned above, was helpful to set the scene of the research and contextualise the findings. Three months later in March 2013, I conducted the follow-up interviews via phone and followed the same procedure with regards to interview format, transcription and analysis. The interviewees were sampled along the lines of broader generations (younger and older than 35 years) and equal gender distribution. All participants identified as Australians, which, as we will witness in the following section, emerges as an inherently ‘cosmopolitised’ (Beck, 2006) label once we observe the interpretive movements of migrating subjectivities.\(^3\)

**The mirror of the Self**

Paul, a retired gentleman in his seventies and my first interviewee, introduces himself and instantly entangles his biography with the museum through the experiences and histories of migration:

My name is Paul and I’m a permanent resident in Australia and have been for, gosh, 60 years or so. I have an interest in immigration matters because of my background. I

\(^2\) This methodological innovation made sense since according to the visitor profile 64% of visitors to the IMM visit in pairs of adults (25% individual adults, 11% adults with children). The museum literature also offers examples of the ‘museum experience as social practice’ (Coffee, 2007).

\(^3\) Throughout the research project informing this paper, I use pseudonyms for the people I interviewed.
have been a refugee. I migrated to Australia in 1950 and I’ve been living here on and off ever since.

Paul and the museum share the same ‘background’ of and ‘interest in immigration matters’.

He continues to narrate and we can discern how ‘migration’ does not only entail ‘the physical movement of human beings’ but, as Keith Jacobs (2011, p. 8) reminds us, also corresponds to a ‘movement’ that ‘makes sense within the semantic spaces of the self’:

I’m always interested in the migrant experience and looking at the exhibition it recalled for me a number of issues, of course the pain of leaving, the uncertainty of deciding where to go, the hardship of learning a new language, the great adventure of actually being exposed to different cultures for the first time. All these are issues that I have interest in and experience of. So I could relate to the content of the exhibitions quite easily.

‘The migrant experience’, according to Paul, involves ‘pain’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘hardship’ and ‘adventure’, subjecting the migrating individual to an ongoing ‘interplay of feeling and movement’ (Jacobs, 2011, p. 8). In other words, migration becomes an experience through the felt and interpreted movement of the migrating body through the passages in-between different socio-political, cultural and economic contexts, among others. Paul has both ‘interest in and experience of’ these subjective dimensions and complex contexts of migration, and thus can naturally ‘relate to the content of the exhibitions quite easily’. It becomes clear that the museum functions as a mirror of the Self since, as Paul puts it in his follow-up interview three months after his visit to the IMM, ‘it reflected some of my own experiences too coming from Europe’.

For Barbara, daughter of Greek immigrants, the mirror of the Self evolves into a shrine of remembrance and therapeutic remedy, once again merging museum and visitor biographies through migrating meanings, memories and histories:

It’s more touching base with my roots…both my parents have passed away and I am doing a little bit of a history on my family, you know, just touching base to give to my children one day so they can understand where their family came from.
Visiting the IMM enables Barbara to ‘touch[ing] base with my roots’, as she puts it. Barbara continuous by emphasising her crucial role in passing on the ‘history on my family’ to the next generation of ‘my children’ so they understand their origins in and connections to other times and places:

Like now I’ve lost my parents, but I’ve got a bit of their history. What do I do with it, other than pass it down to my children?...There’s nothing connecting the next lot of people, other than maybe a Greek surname or something…There’s no other avenue for me to say, look I can put that in the database somewhere, that mum and dad actually existed on the planet, like they were the first generation…It’s like these people never lived, or contributed to this country. There’s not even a record of their name anywhere, other than there’s some marriages…like these people came and they’ve got a story to tell, you know, and before they die, not a second hand story that I could tell you, but their stories.

Being acutely aware of the looming danger of oblivion, Barbara stresses that her predecessors of ‘first generation’ immigrants ‘contributed to this country’ and ‘got a story to tell’. In her opinion, the IMM is one of the few places that could ‘tell their stories’. At this stage, Barbara comments, the exhibitions are ‘almost like a starting point’. In her view, the museum should more actively and extensively embrace its unique function as a shrine of remembrance that preserves the stories of the past for their uses in the present and future. For Barbara, the IMM itself functions as a particular discursive tool for ‘home-building and place-making’ (Castles & Davidson, 2000), as ongoing ontological tasks implicated in the endless interpretive becoming, emerging and making of migratory forms of life. By telling the ‘stories’ and showing the ‘faces’ of those who ‘have come and gone’, or, in other words, by humanising migration, a museum as a ‘bank’ of experiences and memories, which Barbara calls for, can offer a therapeutic remedy against the existential threat of ‘lost history’. That is, while ‘Anglos’ publically tell the immortal tales of their heroic ‘discoveries’ through colonial migration, the deeds of the so-called ‘recent immigrants’ remain in the private sphere of the family nucleus and slowly fade away is if ‘they never existed’. The Immigration Museum offers a small bulwark against that, though for Barbara it is not quite enough.
The window to the Other

After interrogating the IMM’s function as a *mirror of the Self*, we will observe in this section how the museum offers the interpretive means to move beyond the Self and catch a view of the Other. I turn to Ken from Queensland and his ‘first experience’:

My first experience was trying to identify with those people that came to Australia in the 1850s, particularly Victoria, which is where they often came to…for the gold rush…as I went up the stairs again within the museum itself, I then became aware of how these people came to Australia in the ships and how the experience was over in months…it appeared to be anything up to eight months to get here, from England that is, and the conditions in which they travelled in were quite rough…What comes into my mind is the dry toilet that they had to use.

In contrast to other media such as books and movies, a museum can offer ‘three-dimensional objects’ such as ‘ships’, which ‘allow for a physical and simultaneous *multi-sensory* perception of the materiality of migration’ (Poehls, 2011, p. 346). The availability of these objects provide the ‘conditions of meaning-making’, or the hermeneutic foundations that facilitate the subsequent ‘processes of meaning-making’ or interpretations (Schorch, 2013b, forthcoming 2014). Ken, for example, attempts to conclude his hermeneutic journey with the, in Wilhelm Dilthey’s (1976, p. 226) view, ‘highest form of understanding’, that is, the ‘re-creating or re-living…on the basis of empathy or transposition’. By seeing through the *window to the Other*, he tries to ‘re-experience’ (Dilthey, 1976) and thus ‘identify with those people that came to Australia’ during prior historical epochs.

Julia from Western Australia describes a similar empathetic identification with ‘the migrant’s experience’ in a different exhibition space, as she reflects in her follow-up interview:

While we were there the special installation on the Irish migration was there. The pictures and the stories of people who’d formed part of the Irish migration was on at that time, which was really a terrific exhibition to see. We came away with a very strong sense of the kinds of things that motivate people to move…from home and make another completely foreign place home. And the kinds of…forces that are at play when people make that absolutely momentous decision. And how they adapt to a new environment and…when I was in the museum I thought a lot about what a
painful experience it must be in some ways to do that, to leave behind what is absolutely natural and known and just embark on a whole new culture and environment.

Julia’s partner Tony shares her view by stating that ‘I was absolutely amazed that these people would give up their way of life, their family and culture to come over and start anew in a country they didn’t know anything about. And that really struck me’. ‘Pictures and stories of people’ call the attention of both Julia and Tony to the often ‘painful experience’ of the migrating ‘journey of longing to belong’, ‘of a road that…ends with the memory and losses incurred by the places left behind and all the paths forgone’ (Ilcan, 2002, p. 1).

Entangling Self and Other through embodied narratives and narrative embodiment

In some instances, interviewees commented that the Leaving Dublin exhibition posed more questions than offered answers due to the sparse historical and socio-political contextualisation. In others, however, the ‘faces’ and ‘stories’ of the exhibition tightly entangle mirror and window, or Self and Other, through embodied narratives and narrative embodiment. Paul says:

I like the exhibition. The photographs were fantastic, very evocative and artistically… I mean I’m no photographer, but I was struck by just how wonderful the photographs were and just related some of this to my own experience.

By engaging with the ‘evocative…photographs’, Paul ‘related some of this’ to his ‘own experience’ of having been a ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’. He proceeds and shifts his engagement from the photos to the ‘stories’:

The individual stories were quite touching, bringing up all these things of fear and loss and leaving a community and realising that to have a decent life, this was again a theme in the exhibition, people need to somehow take roots in a new community which may be quite strange and forbidden even.

Paul’s ‘own experience’ is embodied in the ‘photographs’ of fellow migrant ‘faces’ while ‘the individual stories’ embody the ‘fear and loss and leaving’. ‘These are the thoughts that
come to me’, Paul concludes, ‘by looking at a picture or photographs and hearing particular stories’. The simultaneous presence of embodied narratives through ‘faces’ and narrative embodiment through ‘stories’ humanises migration and entangles the ‘experience’ of Self and Other. This mutual constitution of ‘narrative’ and ‘embodiment’ should caution us against the perpetuation of binary thinking such as by opposing ‘narrative’ and ‘drama’ (Van Alphen, 2001) or by defining the ‘non-representational’ as ‘anti-biographical’ (Thrift, 2008). Narrative is never only representation but action, performance and drama itself. There is no narrative without characters, without bodies, without flesh. At the same time there is no ‘affect’, ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling’, or whatever inherently contested term we assign to the ‘non-representational’, without a story, without history, without culture (Schorch, 2012).

‘Evocative…pictures’ of bodies and their ‘touching…stories’ are irretrievably intertwined dimensions of the human experience. For Julia, ‘the photographs’ of ‘them’, the ‘faces’ of the protagonists, embody a ‘kind of symbol’ that hints at a potentially happy end of their ‘stories’:

> What I liked about the photographs was the darkness, but in most of them there was light shining through at some point. Something was illuminated and quite bright gold light, which I guess relieved that sense of sadness and, you know, the pain of saying goodbye with this kind of symbol of something new, maybe in the distance but that was going to come to them. I hope it did for them.

**Conclusion**

Drawing on a long-term narrative study of Australian visitors to the Immigration Museum Melbourne, this paper investigated the interpretive experience or hermeneutics of migration through the meaning-making processes of museum visitors. It offered ethnographic insights into how museum and visitor biographies are, at least in this study, intertwined by narratives of migration. That is, the museologically produced and represented experiences and contexts of migration clash and entangle with the migrating experiences and histories of visitors. The
research material showed that the IMM functions as a shrine of remembrance and therapeutic remedy, which in some cases even extended into the actual interview situation and the associated sharing of stories. As one of the ‘visitor comments’ left at the museum equally highlights, ‘it’s the stories not so much the facts which are compelling and draw me into the subject’. The IMM, in its attempt to generate a ‘conversation’ with its visitors, should thus draw ‘issues into ‘stories’, rather than seeing them as opposed. In this context, the ethnographic evidence indicated that the humanisation of migration through ‘faces’ and ‘stories’ renders possible a moral and political engagement between visiting Self and exhibited Other, ameliorating the ‘tension between proximity and distance’ (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 61) and facilitating a dialogical empathy rather than an one-sided sympathy with other experiences (Witcomb, 2009), and a potential critique of the respective context in which they occur.

As Angela rightly stresses, ‘underneath all of this, there’s always a human being who’s immigrating, who’s coming and everyone has a different story behind them’. By polishing the mirror of the Self and the window to the Other, and by ‘making…public’ (Latour & Weibel, 2005) their mutual entanglement through narrative embodiment and embodied narrative, the IMM offers a space and place to draw migrating stories and bodies into the political dynamics and discursive contestations of the public sphere. Tanya’s use of the museum offers empirical support for this theoretical proposition and thus serves well to conclude. ‘The stories of people and the politics of it’, she notes, ‘and being confronted with a racist past that can’t be separated from my heritage and my responsibility in my life to shape the way I live. Yeah, I love coming to this building for that reason…I bring people who probably have never thought about immigration in their life. So, you know, it’s clearly … an important part of my experience of living in Melbourne’.
Bibliography


