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**Critical Heritage Studies Conference**

***Cultural Feelings and the Making of Meaning***

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## Introduction

*When I think of Māori* for some reason I am associating the marae...it really resonated with me...When I saw it, it just *brought back the feelings* that I had had when I had been at the one in Maketu...I just really appreciated that this person was welcoming us into his life, his world and his family so to speak. (Claudia, Canada)

As Claudia in the above quotation reveals, heritage can be seen as a *Gestalt* experience that enables a transformation of the Self through the engagement with the Other. Heritage, I want to argue, is not an inherited essence but an experienced process; a process in which our emotions and feelings are enmeshed with our thoughts. In fact, the *dimensions* of thinking and feeling heritage are tightly interwoven and could never be dichotomised into separate stages. While the paper develops this argument through an analysis of a small number of narratives provided by global visitors to Te Papa, I also want to use their narrated experiences to intervene in what appears to be a growing opposition between representational and non-representational forms of analysis. Given that, as Dewey (1934:18) once famously said, in ‘life that is truly life, everything overlaps and merges’, I consider ‘distinctions’ such as ‘narrative’ and ‘affect’, which are often seen as mutually exclusive human phenomena, as interrelated *traces* which make sense only in their *relations* within the Self. By embedding such a theoretical synthesis in the analysis of a lived experience, or empirical reality, I argue that we gain insights into the ‘more than representational’ (Smith, 2006) avoiding reductionist approaches ‘against the representational’ and thus drawing a complex both/and rather than a simplistic either/or picture, as Waterton (2012 (in press)) equally stresses.

The long-term narrative study of global visitors to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), which informs this paper, shows that the engagement with a museum space begins on a sensory, emotive and embodied level. Claudia from Canada, for example, stresses that “you really get drawn into the scene” through “sensory experiences”, a

hermeneutic condition I term *emotive and sensory contextualisation*. Visitors' narrations reveal the ubiquitous presence of the emotive dimension throughout the experience. The ontological sense of a feeling, the feeling of being, first precedes and is then permanently intertwined with intellectual and interpretive processes. While language performs as the main cultural tool for the 'growth of meaning' (Johnson, 2007), certain meanings remain on an embodied level as "internal understandings", as Claudia put it, and resist any attempt of formal verbalisation. In the context of Te Papa, with its strong bicultural approach to the representation of New Zealand culture and identity, this emotive trajectory carries through the visitors' own cross-cultural journeys within this material museum space, manifesting itself as *cultural feelings*.

### **Theoretical Framework: Feelings as Interpretations**

My argument for *feelings as interpretations* receives theoretical support through a better understanding of how emotions and feelings work. According to Damasio (2000), emotions are unconscious and outward directed responses to the environment while feelings are inward directed reflections requiring consciousness. Remarkably, even unconscious emotions have an evaluative and embodied interpretive dimension. Damasio (2003:54) argues that 'Emotions provide a natural means for the brain and mind to evaluate the environment within and around the organism, and respond accordingly and adaptively.' Consequently, these 'immanent' or 'embodied meanings' (Johnson, 2007) feed directly into our conscious interpretations. To put it succinctly, feelings have an inherently hermeneutic quality linking the *conditions and processes of meaning-making* in an embodied way, as we witness in the interpretive sections. But first I need to translate the theoretical argument into a methodological framework.

## **Methodological Framework: Embodied Hermeneutics**

Since I consider *feelings as interpretations* embedded in narrative contexts such as culture, biography and history, I need to employ hermeneutics as a methodological tool because it places the individual experience within a socio-cultural context and in the process illuminates the hermeneutic circle connecting the whole and its parts (Dilthey, 1976). ‘The individual person in his independent existence is’, as Dilthey (1976:181) argues, ‘a historical being’ entangled in a ‘whole web of relationships’. The interpretive dissection of this complex cultural world contrasts ‘hermeneutics’ with ‘phenomenology’ since ‘the subject of which it speaks is always open to the efficacy of history’ (Ricoeur, 1981:111). Ricoeur (1981:123) allows an integrated synthesis by emphasising that ‘perception ‘represents’ because it is already the seat of a work of interpretation’, thus complicating the logic of binary opposition between either representation or non-representation. Consequently, ‘phenomenology’ immediately ‘encounters the concept of interpretation’ and ‘can be realised only as hermeneutics’ (Ricoeur, 1981:123;128). Ricoeur (1981:118;115), however, stresses equally the ‘phenomenological presupposition of hermeneutics’ by ‘subordinating *Sprachlichkeit*’, the claim of ‘the lingual condition...of all experience’ and its ‘expressibility in principle’, to the ‘pre-linguistic...structure of experience’.

Ricoeur’s (1981) emphasis on the phenomenological dimension of hermeneutics is a crucial point but it is still linguistically dominated since the proclaimed ‘subordinating’ implies that experience ‘comes to language’ in its search for meaning. While I equally argue for hermeneutics due to its historical contextualisation of the subjects under scrutiny, I fundamentally disagree with such ‘linguistic absolutism’ and the exhaustive reduction of meaning to language. In fact, I intend to hermeneutically demonstrate this assertion to be an impoverishing view of the human experience. Although I interrogate experiences as

interpretations via a narrative analysis, this does not amount to a claim that we would ever be able to verbalise all meanings. Many meanings will be interpreted but remain *feelings* or ‘embodied meanings’.

It is clear that by employing a narrative approach, I will get access to only mediated and reflective feelings rather than subconscious emotions. Given the inherently evaluative nature of such feelings, which I lay bare both theoretically and empirically, I am able to hermeneutically grasp their meaning even when they lack elaborated verbalisation. As reiterated throughout this study, some meanings remain feelings without further linguistic expression. In Davidson’s (2006) study of mountaineers, for example, it was simply a ‘mountain feeling’. What is required I believe is an *embodied hermeneutics* with a sensitivity beyond the spoken word without, however, committing phenomenological de-contextualisation. Language, although being inherently selective and reductive of the *Gestalt* experience, is our ‘great vehicle for the growth of meaning’ (Johnson, 2007:266-67). It is this ‘growth of meaning’ or interpretation as a ‘development of understanding’ (Ricoeur, 1981) that we witness in this article.

### **The Conditions of Meaning-Making: Senses, Feelings and Embodiment**

I turn now to the interviewees’ stories and my examination of the research material which, as I attempt to show, expose *senses, feelings and embodiment* as *conditions of meaning-making*, or hermeneutic foundations, that facilitate the subsequent interpretive *processes of meaning-making* (Schorch, forthcoming). Here Michelle from the USA narrates her experience of the *earthquake house*:

*We walked into the little house and then there was an earthquake and it reminded me a little bit about when I lived in Los Angeles. Well, I think I was probably a teenager and we had an earthquake and I woke up with my bed just shaking and shaking. I*

couldn't figure out what was happening. And then I finally realised 'oh it's an earthquake'. It wasn't a terrible earthquake where people were, you know, losing their homes, but things fell off the shelf and dishes could have been broken...*But just experiencing an earthquake in the museum, I am sure a lot of people had never experienced what that would be like.*

The significance of prior understandings (Ricoeur, 1981) and prior experiences (Dewey, 1934) for any experience becomes obvious in Michelle's story. In this context, the narration provides an example of a *multisensory and emotive contextualisation as condition of meaning-making*. This leads to an embodied 'interactivity' as 'self-inscription' (Witcomb, 2003) in a way that goes beyond 'narrative'. The latter could never fully capture or contextualise the human experience of an earthquake since it can only objectify the visceral dimension. Experiencing an earthquake lacks 'expressibility', the alleged 'lingual condition...of all experience' (Ricoeur, 1981:115), and will remain a *feeling* or "internal understanding". Michelle's articulation also proves that any conscious experience and thought process has an imaginative quality (Jackson, 1998). In other words, "experiencing an earthquake" can never be disassociated from feeling, rationalising and imagining an earthquake.

Susan, also from the USA, refers below to the same exhibit and provides further empirical evidence of these assertions:

And I also found interesting that New Zealand was at such a big risk for earthquakes, I found that interesting. I wasn't home, but at home this past summer there was a 5.2 on the Richter scale in Chicago and they felt it in St. Louis and Indianapolis, which is kind of big because like St. Louis is more than 400 miles away from Chicago, Indianapolis is 300 miles from Chicago. It's kind of a big deal. *Standing in the house like feeling it shake, I was like 'oh, so this is what my mom was talking about, this is kind of interesting' ...when you walk into the house and you get to feel an actual house shaking, most people have never lived through an earthquake.*

Susan's experience arises out of a multisensory, emotive and embodied 'object-subject interaction' (Dudley, 2009), a process of active and mutual engagement between Self and the

physical world. “Standing in the house like feeling it shake” provokes a deeper understanding of “what”, according to Susan, “my mom was talking about”. This emphasises the active character of ‘perception’. Dewey (1934:54) stresses that perceptions are not passive and isolated receptions but transactionally constituted actions because ‘for to perceive’, he puts it, ‘a beholder must *create* his own experience’. Damasio (1994:225) offers neuroscientific support for this philosophical claim: ‘Perceiving is as much about acting on the environment as it is about receiving signals from it.’ Once again the supposedly rigid border between non-representation and representation is blurred.

In continuing her story, Susan exclaims that “we have all of our senses for a reason”. According to her, “being able to...experience and touch that and feel that and look at that” makes the museum experience “a little different”. In fact, the multisensory access to exhibitions and objects beyond the common ‘ocularcentric’ (Dudley, 2009) dominance in the ‘museum’s empire of sight’ (Classen and Howes, 2006) appears to Susan “almost...like a children’s museum for adults”. This conclusion applauds Te Papa’s “set up”, but equally highlights the artificial sensory alienation from childhood to adulthood in traditional approaches to education, learning and human development. ‘Pervasive qualities’ of any experience, however, are ‘at once visual, auditory, tactile, social and cultural’ (Johnson, 2007:72). Susan attests both empirically and theoretically to this ‘relational character of perception’ (Jackson, 1998) and proceeds with the narrative reflection on her multisensory museum journey:

*Well, I mean you can always look at the carvings and you can see the intricate detail, but not until you actually feel the wood or the stone, because your eyes can only see so much detail depending on how good your vision is, but your finger tips are extremely sensitive and you can feel the detail even more than just viewing it. And you just take on a more a better appreciation, you realise ‘that’s right, this is wood, that’s extremely difficult to do, this is stone, this takes so much time, so much back ache and can you imagine having to bend down and look at it like this?!’ And just it’s a*

*different appreciation like something you don't normally think about in everyday life... I don't know it's just a very, it's awe, I was very awestruck, it was beautiful.*

Susan's multisensory, emotive and embodied engagement flows into the interpretive construction of meanings integrating the conditions and processes of meaning-making in a circular hermeneutic trajectory. The 'corporal encounter' creates a 'medium of intimacy', as Classen and Howes (2006:200;202) argue, which enables Susan's hand to encounter 'the traces of the hand of the object's creator' and thus connect to *both* 'sensory as well as social biographies' of a carved object or material reality. Jackson (1998:57) sums up my preceding theoretical line of thought by stating that 'to perceive an object is not simply to see, hear, smell or touch it', as *the* psychological fallacy' would have us believe, 'it is to make sense of what one senses, to partake of its meaning'. In Susan's case, 'to partake of its meaning' leads to a "better appreciation" beyond "everyday life" which leaves her "very awestruck". Senses and feelings merge in the process of meaning-making causing an embodied or "internal understanding" far beyond linguistic 'expressibility'.

### **The Processes of Meaning-Making: Cultural Feelings**

If the interpretive human condition could never be completely grasped by words, then neither do our innate sensory and emotive engagements pose a threat to some 'higher' form of knowledge and 'truth' in a museum context, as Williams (2003) claims. Dewey (1934:118) reminds us that, instead, 'sense qualities are the carriers of meanings'. Dewey (1934:119) continues to alert us to the 'qualitative determinations', the 'felt sense' (Johnson, 2007), of any thought, knowledge or 'truth' *itself* and exposes such dichotomising accusation as naivety: 'We cannot grasp any idea, any organ of mediation, we cannot possess it in its full force, until we have felt and sensed it, as much so as if it were an odor or color.' It is again Susan who provides more empirical insights on this point:

And then looking at the canoe and seeing how small of a canoe that is, how wide it is and *trying to imagine* a six-foot man sitting in that cross-legged or even hunched down, *being able to feel* that and like ‘that’s crazy’. You know, *I wouldn’t be able to experience that if it was set up behind glass and like looking at it. I wouldn’t actually be able to tell the depth I feel. And that not just me personally, but you just, you can almost feel yourself stepping into the canoe when it’s set up in the middle of the floor like that and when you are able to walk into the building...*

We can again discern that senses, feelings, imagination, thought and understanding are not separate or diametrically opposed entities, but mutually dependent, interrelated and overlapping *dimensions of the conditions and processes of meaning-making*. Remarkably, even this narrative reflection and retrospective mediation of the actual experience reveals these dynamics of the *Gestalt*, the unified whole. Given the limits of this study and the general impossibility of gaining direct access to a ‘pure’ experience, we can only speculate about the intermeshed richness of Susan’s actually experienced ‘situation’ and its ‘pervasive’ or ‘individualising quality’ (Jackson, 1998). Susan carries on to “to tell the depth I feel”:

I have always loved jade....And being able to see the big stone sitting in the, is it the Blood, Earth & Fire display?!...*Just being able to touch that, again it’s touching it and feeling it and seeing exactly how smooth it is and just being able to really look at the detail instead of it sitting in the glass behind a case. And hop, there it is, you know, you can’t really touch it and like oh that’s great. And my brain kind of it gets fried eventually. You know you are walking around looking at the displays and you are reading over it and you start just skimming through and picking up keywords and you halfway understand it, but if you can like feel it and you are interested in it a little more you gonna understand it a little better...*

It becomes clear that to “feel” invites us to be “interested” and enables us to “understand”. It follows that feelings possess an immanently hermeneutic quality. Susan’s follow-up interview offers evidence of the long-term impact of the multidimensional interplay between *senses, feelings and embodiment*. ‘Experience and memory are’, according to Chakrabarty (2002), ‘embodied knowledge’. Embodiment performs simultaneously as condition and process of meaning-making. It lives on in memory, in Susan’s case as a “fe[lt] ...presence”:

The displays and exhibits that I really remember were the Māori displays and the, I don’t remember what it was called, not like a temple but a meeting room where they perform their meetings?! And you were able to take off your shoes and enter in and

just kind of sit there and soak it all in. *You feel the presence and everything and like all the beautiful carvings and it's nice being able to touch everything and just look at the different, the very beautiful intricate details on the carvings.*

For Susan, a “fe[lt]...presence” seems to imprint on her memory more profoundly than factual information such as the name of the “Māori displays”. While cultural critiques may delight in detecting new ammunition for their accusations of sensory and emotive ‘trivialisation’, I find that conversely this presents further evidence for the inescapably embodied anchoring of meanings. The challenge in life as in museums lies in maintaining and nurturing a healthy balance of *all dimensions of the conditions of meaning-making*. In the context of this article, the empirical evidence demonstrates that the conditions and processes of meaning-making are tightly interwoven with the construction of memories.

## **Conclusion**

By arguing for *feelings as interpretations* in theoretical, methodological and empirical terms, I have shaped an integrated synthesis of *both* representational *and* non-representational dimensions. If the human experience, the ‘most ineffable of cultural phenomenon’ (Healy and Witcomb, 2006:1.4.), is the point of departure, then either/or approaches will not do the trick. Such dualisms are specific products of the intellectual, or abstract, world and should not be simply imposed on empirical realities thus foreclosing any nuanced understanding. The objects of the material world *themselves* ‘have sensory as well as social biographies’ (Classen and Howes, 2006:200). To put it differently, nothing is ever only material but embedded in the complex grammar and ecology of embodied culture and cultural embodiment.

I have shown that senses, feelings and embodiment interact with narrative in the quest for meaning. These *dimensions* and *traces* are inextricably entangled within the human experience: without one another, they wither and die. In order to maintain such a holistic

awareness, I think it requires a shift from an oscillating to a circular dialectic which tracks the hermeneutic *relations* between the whole and its parts, and vice versa. I have pursued this with an embodied hermeneutics and my ‘distinction’ between the *conditions and processes of meaning-making* through an understanding of interpretive actions, movements and performances made by cultural actors should offer a useful basis for more ethnographic research dissecting the ‘moments’ and ‘processes’ of heritage. Our knowledge of the physicality of the museum experience (Dudley) and of ‘what exactly people do...with the concept of heritage itself’ (Smith, 2006:45) is still very limited, which emphasises the need to carry the phenomenon of heritage from the world of abstract reasoning into the realm of lived experience.

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