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The Cosmopolitan Ideal: Challenges and Opportunities

Museums and the cosmohermeneutics of migration

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Introduction

Drawing on a long-term narrative study of Australian visitors to the Immigration Museum Melbourne (IMM), this paper explores the hermeneutic complexities of migration through the meaning-making processes of museum visitors, who entangle meaning, memory and belonging through a complex web of interpretive negotiations. Throughout this process, museum exhibitions and visitor biographies become intertwined through narratives of migration. Migration emerges as a human practice that transforms cosmopolitanism from an abstract normative ideal into a *lived* and *interpreted reality*. This paper, then, is devoted to the *cosmohermeneutics of migration*, that is, to an experienced and thus 'actually exciting cosmopolitanism' (Malcomson 1998).

The discursive constructions of migration

Ours has been widely branded as the 'age of migration' (Castles and Miller 1993) and the 'age of minorities' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The intensifying forces of globalisation, induced by modern means of transportation and communication, and the associated mobility of people, seem to have turned 'migration' into an omnipresent human practice. While several scholars have inspected the characteristics of the current 'age of migration' (Babacan and Singh 2010; Castles and Davidson 2000; Mansouri and Lobo 2011; Jacobs 2011), others have emphasised its embeddedness in historical processes. 'If we look back to the great migrations', Ulrich Beck (2004, 447) argues, for example, 'we might stretch a point and say that there are no indigenous peoples'. While this point is certainly overstretched with regards to postcolonial politics in former settler states such as Australia, it alludes to the modern origin of the category 'Indigeneity', which, as migration, is discursively produced and contested. In other words, the same migrating practice might be conceived as a specific

contemporary phenomenon or as an 'anthropological constant' (Wonisch 2012) and inherent aspect of the 'conditio humana' (Baur 2010).

Once we enter the political arena, the hermeneutic complexities evolve into political strategies of occasionally paradoxical proportions, as can be observed in the case of Australia. 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, 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 so-called '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, can 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, can be 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 discursive constructions of migration at the IMM

The Immigration Museum Melbourne (IMM), founded in 1998, offers an interesting case to study the aforementioned discursive constructions of migration. 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 a 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'. I will return to the discursive contrast between 'migration history' and 'cultural diversity' as well as between 'story' and 'issue' in the conclusion but for now devote the core of this paper to the open question of how visitors construct migration and how, if at all, they engage in dialogue or 'conversation' with the discursive museum space.

Ethnographic research has shown how visitors to the IMM appropriate the museum for 'memory and identity work' (Smith 2013). This paper, then, offers more empirical insights into how visitors construct or *experience migration*. 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 exhibitions and visitor biographies, then, are intertwined by narratives of migration. By *humanising migration* through interpretive movements (Schorch 2013) and narrative meanings (Schorch forthcoming 2014) negotiated by museum visitors, or cultural actors, I inspect both individual migrating experiences and their wider contexts. All participants identified as Australians, which, as we will witness in the following section, emerges as an inherently 'cosmopolitanised' (Beck 2006) label.[2]

Visitors, migration and cosmopolitan biographies

Paul, a man in his seventies with a calm and pleasant demeanour, was my first interviewee. His opening narration, in which he introduced himself and did not touch on the museum visit, offers the first example of a self-identified Australian with a 'cosmopolitanised' biography and history of migration:

> My family, while we were still in Hungary, after the Second World War, we were forever talking about leaving, starting a new life, the challenges of doing that. My family had a long history actually of migration which means that I have relatives in Sweden, in Denmark, in France, in the United States, who had left at various times, some before the Second World War.

Paul continues:

> My father was a journalist and in 1937 he was a correspondent in France for a series of Hungarian newspapers…he died before the war…he was both a left wing journalist and a Jew…And having had that experience of living in France for two years, my mother was adamant that we won't stay in Hungary and it took, you know, from 1945 to 1949 to sort out where we could go and when. We were really keen to go to the

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[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.

[2] Throughout the research project informing this paper, I use pseudonyms for the people I interviewed.

United States. But once we left as refugees it became obvious that you'd have to wait for many years before you could get into America. Some people went to Canada and hoped that they could sort of cross the border into the United States and many did. So for us Australia wasn't by any means the first choice. Lived in Austria for ten months and then this opportunity came to come to Australia. We grabbed it because we were sick of being displaced persons as we were then.

Paul's *experience* of migration extends beyond his own biography over several generations through his whole family and connects him with various geographic knots in the global web of migrating threads. His story encapsulates both the partially dramatic dimensions of migratory movements, caused by persecution, exile and no return, and the potential outlook of a new sense of belonging and Self. Peter states that 'when we came, the Hungarians of the 1950s, I mean there was no way back…we had escaped and there was no place for us to return until, I guess, the 80s by which time we were Australians'. Out of necessity instead of 'choice', Peter's 'biographical cosmopolitanisation' (Beck 2006) and experience of 'polygamy of place' (Beck 1997) through the practice of migration equips him with the discursive tools of a 'shifting Self' (Schorch 2013). That is, Peter identifies with the 'multiple loyalties' (Beck 2006) of being *both* 'Hungarian' *and* 'Australian', *both* 'migrant' *and* 'refugee'.

Barbara, daughter of first generation immigrants from Greece, offers another example of the multiple identifications of a cosmopolitan biography, which should not be understood as the celebration of diversity or the accumulation of an elitist cultural capital, but as the expression of a profoundly 'cosmopolitanised' life:

> My parents would comment on different things of their homeland or their nostalgia for home, how Australia is like…a prison without bars, that was a very common thing for them to say. Because they felt like they always wanted to go home, but this is now their home and right near the end, right before they passed away, that's how they felt, that this is now their home, you know. Greece has a special place in their heart, but this is always going to be their home now.

The 'nostalgic feeling' of her parents, longing to leave the 'prison without bars' and return 'home', left an 'air of sadness all the time', which, as Barbara laments, 'for me was horrible, because it was always sad'. Her parents' experience of migration and the associated 'longing in belonging' (Ilcan 2002) has become a 'vicarious memory', the 'strong emotional attachments' passed from one generation to the next in 'narrative form' (Climo 1995, 176). Despite the overwhelming sense of loss and pain, there gradually emerges, however, a new sense of 'home' and Self through the generational progression of Barbara's family:

> That's where I'm coming from, to show my children, alright, we had a history in Greece, but we've also got a history here. I got my grandmother buried here, I've got my parents now, you know, I got a nephew, like there's at least five generations buried here, so it's not we've just come from Greece, we've also got a history here. And I want to sort of connect that for them, pass it on to them.

Barbara's family, as other migrants, take their roots with them (Appiah 1996) and ultimately embrace their multiple 'histor[ies]' *both* 'in Greece' *and* 'here' in Australia. Importantly, while their interpretive agency enables Paul and Barbara to negotiate and revise their sense of Self, they are simultaneously subjected to wider socio-political contexts that affect the destination and destiny of 'displaced persons'.

Museums, migration and cosmopolitan histories

I turn to the interview with Tony, whose experience of an introductory film at the entrance to the main exhibition demonstrates the museum's potential to 'reframe understandings' (Schorch 2013) and facilitate dialogue or 'conversation' with visitors around the 'issues' of migration, which, as I noted above, the IMM sets out to achieve:

> I thoroughly enjoyed that film, when we first arrived. It was sort of diverse. You don't think of people from Korea or wherever in those terms of people migrating. When you see the devastation, famine and war…There were so many different nations that I didn't think about, seeing that film, that for some reason had to migrate, whether it be famine or war, whatever. I found that very interesting… That brought it home to me that there are a lot more people coming here than just the British and whatever, Europeans…

Tony's narration attests to the film's capacity to treat migration as a 'cosmopolitanised' phenomenon. That is, migration can only be understood through the relationship between different localities enmeshed in the global flow of migrating populations. The multiplicity of causes such as 'natural disasters' and 'famine' complicates simplistic notions of migration as individual choice. In the cases of 'war' and the global economy, common assumptions mostly conceal the reality that receiving countries, such as Australia, are active participants in the processes leading to migratory movements (Sassen 2010). Maria, a student from Canberra, shares Tony's reframed understanding of this complexity by summing up in her follow-up interview three months after visiting the IMM: 'when I think about people having to move, whether they be asylum seeker, refugees or migrants, I don't think about Western Europe so much as other regions, like Africa…Those parts [of the museum] I've mentioned kind of highlighted things that I haven't learnt about so much in school. I've done a lot of history but not that much on immigration in Australian history'.

The discursive construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of migration and its respective boundedness to specific sociol-political contexts contrasts the global outlook of the museum with the, at least until the recent past, predominant Anglo-Celtic focus in Australian school education, as Tanya equally emphasises: 'when I was a child going through the Australian school system, I was taught about James Cook, I was taught about the first fleet and I was taught it over and over and over and over again with very little really provided in regards to Australian history from the perspective of Aboriginal people and Australian history from the perspective of people who have arrived in the last hundred years. And that's where the richness is for me'.

An 'uneasy' multicultural 'conversation' with a cosmopolitan outlook

Tanya carries her critique into the realm of 'obtuse' museological representations of the 'uneasy conversation' (Curthoys 2000) between Australian Aboriginality and the various societal constructions, from colonialism to multiculturalism, that have governed Australia. She sums up in her follow-up interview that her 'spiralling sense of frustration' caused by an apparently 'misrepresented' history 'struck me initially…and then stayed with me'. Maria, by contrast, seems to have a more positive view on the evolution of the 'uneasy conversation' since, in her view, 'the Indigenous history was kind of intermingled with not just Anglo Australians but also immigrants. I guess I don't often see that, the sort of three separate, or two and two, but never three together'. Experiencing the 'three together', then, gives Maria a sense of 'multiculturalism':

> I think because for me a lot of the exhibitions are framed around people who draw on their own culture, or keep it all, you know, through their religion, through their cooking, through their whatever, but there was a big emphasis on being proud to be an Australian, so I think that's where it becomes multiculturalism, where it's kind of a combining of the two…retaining culture from other countries and also feeling like an Australian and feeling like you fit in and have an identity that can, you know, not necessarily mutually exclusive, you can have both, be an Australian and have Indian heritage, or whatever.

Maria's understanding of 'multiculturalism' is, I would argue, a form of 'actually existing cosmopolitanism' (Malcomson 1998), that is, the lived and interpreted ontological realities of multiple 'both/and' identifications caused by the human practice of migration. This *cosmohermeneutics of migration* transforms cosmopolitanism from an abstract normative ideal into a *lived* and *interpreted reality*. The 'immigrant life' is, as Scott L. Malcomson (1998) puts it aptly, 'a model of cosmopolitanism'. Out of necessity rather than choice, the migrating subjectivity evolves through a kind of 'cosmopolitanism' as 'habits of thought and feeling' (Robbins 1998) instead of normative aspirations. An example of the associated dialogical and 'positive recognition of difference', which differs from an isolating 'tolerance

of difference' pursued by liberal notions of a 'communitarian multiculturalism' (Delanty, Jones, and Wodak 2008, 14), is discovered by Julia at the IMM:

> There are a very large number of different cultural and religious experiences that are brought to Australia by its migrants, and that it's something to be proud of and to be respectful of. Yeah, it's very respectful of the differences, but it certainly tells a story of times when Australia hasn't been like that. It's a very common thread, very strong thread in Australia's history isn't it...All the mechanisms for keeping people out, that they are regarded as other in some way.

Julia reflects on her museum visit in her follow-up interview and alludes to the endemic presence of a 'diversity' or 'difference within' (Bhabha 1994):

> I was impressed by the diversity of Irish people who decided to make the move. I mean they weren't just all people who were struggling to find employment in Ireland or who maybe came from a particular social stratum or anything like that, there was a huge variety. There were young women, young men and sometimes they were married and a part of a family unit that moved or sometimes they just headed out by themselves. So you couldn't characterise them as being a particular type of person. There was a huge variety.

'The diversity of Irish people', which 'impressed' Julia, prevents her from 'characteris[ing] them as being a particular type of person'. It becomes clear that the exhibition, *Leaving Dublin*, *humanises culture* by transforming the abstract category 'Irish' into concrete 'stories' and 'faces', thus shaping a 'pluralist cosmopolitan space' (Schorch 2013) that facilitates multiple identifications in a shared discursive terrain and subjects otherness to an endemic relativity. The normative prescription of 'multiculturalism', instead, celebrates a diversity that, as Ulrich Beck (2004, 446-47) correctly argues, lacks 'ambivalence, complexity, or contingency', and, by presupposing collective cultural labels such as 'Irish', is 'necessarily opposed to processes of individualisation' and other forms of difference beyond the 'cultural'. It follows that the complex experience of migration cannot be exhaustively understood, explained and critiqued through the cultural lenses and dichotomous view of multicultural binoculars.

Conclusion

Drawing on a long-term narrative study of Australian visitors to the Immigration Museum Melbourne, I interrogated 'migration' *as an experience* and explored its hermeneutic complexities through the meaning-making processes of museum visitors, who entangled meaning, memory and belonging in a complex web of interpretive negotiations. We observed that the museum offers a window to the Other and a mirror to the Self. That is, the museologically produced and represented experiences and contexts of migration clash and entangle with the migrating experiences and histories of visitors. Both sides of the same coin, museum and visitor biographies, are intertwined through narratives of migration and the associated 'existential movement' (Hage 2005) and endemic 'becoming' of migratory lives 'in-between' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

I have argued for the *cosmohermeneutics of migration* as the interpretive 'movement' and 'becoming' experienced by cultural actors through the human practice of migration embedded in particular contexts. These interpretive realities and their historical and contemporary manifestations should provide a more viable basis for the development of a 'positive recognition of difference' (Delanty, Jones, and Wodak 2008) than the intervention of a normative ideal, whether it is called multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism. Scholars of museum studies have wondered what could replace the essential and restricting notions of 'ethnicity' (Ang 2009) and how we could 'represent difference' while also emphasizing commonalities (Witcomb 2009). A cosmopolitan museum practice, which pays tribute to an 'actually existing cosmopolitanism' (Malcomson 1998) as a lived and interpreted ontological reality of shifting subjectivities rather than a refashioning of an elitist cultural capital (Calhoun 2002), might offer an answer. Such an approach would enable the IMM to explore themes such as 'diversity' and 'identity' *through* the 'history of migration' and tackle 'issues'

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through 'stories'. Instead of dualistically opposing these thematic orientations, as we have seen above, their inextricable entanglement should be dissected. In other words, history has always been diverse and stories have always dealt with issues. I conclude with Peter, who assisted me first in beginning and now in finishing this paper, and his view that 'it's a great little museum and I hope that it will endure for as long as there are migrants, which is forever I guess'.

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