

“Look, Listen and Feel” : The *First Peoples* exhibition at the Bunjilaka Gallery, Melbourne Museum

« Regardez, écoutez, ressentez » : l'exposition *First Peoples* au centre culturel Bunjilaka, Musée de Melbourne

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“LOOK, LISTEN AND FEEL”: THE FIRST PEOPLES EXHIBITION AT THE BUNJILAKA GALLERY, MELBOURNE MUSEUM

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Abstract

In 1997, James Clifford used a contact zone perspective to argue for the need to work towards a collaborative museum practice that recognized the politics of practices of knowledge exchange between museums and indigenous communities. In his view, it was only by recognizing these politics that museums could reverse their traditional mode of knowledge production, one based on extraction of knowledge from source communities, and, in the process, develop a new, more ethical relationship with these communities in ways that recognized not only what they were being given but what they must also give in return. In this article, I look at the latest instance of this practice in Australia by reviewing the new permanent exhibition in Bunjilaka at the Melbourne Museum branch of Museum Victoria, an exhibition called First Peoples. I am particularly concerned with understanding how the importance of establishing a deep collaborative practice between the museum and indigenous communities in Victoria led to an exhibition in which the Museum accepted the challenge to rethink its own practices in relation to who had power to determine what stories were told and how objects were interpreted but also accepted the wider challenge to allow the museum space to become a vehicle for indigenous perspectives on settlement history and its consequent impact on indigenous/settler relations. In particular, I want to show how dealing with contact history from a perspective of indigenous culture helped to build a “pedagogy of feeling” which created a space for indigenous and non-indigenous people to come together in the hope of building a shared future.

Keywords: pedagogy of feeling; collaborative curatorial practices; reconciliation

In 1997, James Clifford argued, in his now widely cited essay “Museums as Contact Zones”, for the need to work towards a collaborative museum practice that recognized the politics of knowledge exchange between museums and indigenous communities. The museum, he argued, should be a site of “an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship – a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull” (Clifford 1997:192). For Clifford, this was because the knowledge that is produced in these contexts cannot be reduced to information as the stories that are told about objects by indigenous elders situate them within ongoing stories of struggle, stories that the museum is then obligated to take on. Clifford then, was interested in asking how museums needed to change if this responsibility, to play an active role in the present day lives of these communities, was to take place. In his view, it was only by recognizing these politics that museums could reverse their traditional mode of knowledge production, one based on the extraction of knowledge from source communities, and, in the process, develop a new, more ethical relationship with these communities in ways that recognized not only what museums were being given but what they must also give back in return.

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The last twenty years or so have seen many developments along this road, with various experiments in developing more collaborative exchanges between museums and their source communities. As Laura Peers and Alison Brown (2003) have argued, these experiments have been particularly strong in settler nations, such as Canada, the US, New Zealand and Australia. In this article, I look at the latest instance of this practice in Australia by analysing *First Peoples*, the new permanent exhibition in Bunjilaka¹ at the Melbourne Museum branch of Museum Victoria. I am concerned with understanding how the importance of establishing a deep collaborative practice between the Museum and indigenous communities in Victoria led to an exhibition in which the Museum not only accepted the challenge to rethink its own practices in relation to who had power to determine which stories were told and how objects were interpreted, but also undertook the challenge to allow the museum space to become a vehicle for indigenous perspectives on settlement history and its consequent impact on indigenous/settler relations. In doing so, I want to argue that this exhibition goes beyond a collaborative approach to the representation of indigenous culture. In also taking on history, this exhibition is explicitly oriented to a narrative of reconciliation between indigenous and settler groups on indigenous terms. The article analyses how this is achieved through an experiential mode of exhibition making, one I call a “pedagogy of feeling”, rather than one based on the provision of information. At the same time, I also want to recognize the limitations to this approach to exhibition making by recognizing the limitations to a consensus mode of political practice.

In developing this argument, I move beyond the dominant anthropological frame in which relations between museums and communities have been mostly understood. In part, this is because the question within which most discussions have occurred has been around the need for museums to change their colonial mindset. As Ruth Phillips (2003:153) has argued, the assumption is that “by validating knowledge produced according to diverse cultural traditions, museums contribute to the erosion of the modernist universal values” which underpinned the colonial encounter. While this question has produced a valuable documentation of the changes that have occurred, there are aspects to contemporary exhibitions practices that can be obscured by the need to demonstrate that change has occurred in museum practices. In structural terms the problem is that this need to demonstrate change has led to an exclusive focus on the politics of the relationship between the institution and the source communities, particularly a concern with the democratic quality of these power relations. This exclusive concern with the relations between museums and communities (indicated for example in the titles of Golding and Modest 2013, Peers and Brown 2003, Watson 2007, all of which have museums and communities in them) can have the effect of obscuring the ways in which audiences are thought about and brought into the relationship. The other issue that can be obscured is the extent of the shift in recent curatorial practices from objects to people – a shift that is central to the prioritizing of the ethics and politics of knowledge exchange. Much of the debate around the politics of the relations between museums and source communities centres on who is interpreting the collection which is not a surprise if the frame we are using is that of the ethnographic collection and the discipline of cultural anthropology. And yet, what has occurred during the period in which collaborative exhibitions have developed, is that history has taken as important a place as anthropology as a discipline base from which to develop the ethical demands produced by operating within a contact zone perspective. What I want to demonstrate then is that we have come to a new stage in our relations with indigenous communities, one in which the complex nature of the cross-cultural dialogue that is now occurring makes just as many demands on settler/culturally dominant audiences to modify their assumptions and belief systems as museums were asked to make when we first began to take collaboration seriously. What *First Peoples* demonstrates is that the conversation is no longer just between museums and communities over the collection and the politics of its representation. It is also about people and the relations between them, particularly as these play out in terms of the legacy of the past in the present. In the case of *First Peoples*, these relations are between indigenous communities and the white majority. To put it another way, developing museum practices from a contact zone perspective has led to new conversations involving new understandings of what it is to be a citizen in a pluralist society that had its beginnings in a colonial encounter.

Ruth Phillips was getting close to this insight when she argued that:

The paradigmatic shift being introduced through collaborative exhibit development... raises fundamental questions not only about the ways that contemporary museums are repositioning themselves as they respond to the powerful currents of cultural pluralism, decolonization, and globalization, but also about the changing relationship between museums and the societies within which they operate. (Phillips 2003:153)

Identifying what this changing relationship between museums and societies is and how it is achieved, is one of the things that a close analysis of *First Peoples* can illuminate.

My starting point for this is another insight from Phillips (2003) in which she rightly pointed out that we now have a history of collaborative models that have important differences between them. While all of them involve a significant level of power sharing that leads to the identification of exhibition themes, the co-writing of text panels, the selection of objects and even the design of the exhibition, in ways that support the principle of human rights to self-determination and extensive “to-ing and fro-ing” as a significant element of the collaborative process, two different models can nevertheless be distinguished. For Phillips these are the community-based and the multivocal exhibit. The community-based exhibit is the result of a collaborative process in which the curator is a facilitator, enabling community groups to use the museum space to broadcast their messages. “The community”, Phillips argues, “is the final arbiter of content, text, and other key components, and the museum becomes an extension of its space, a place in which its own images of its members’ lifestyles, values, and concerns are projected” (Phillips 2003:63). Quite often, objects are decentred in favour of narratives, stories and performances. The multivocal exhibition, in contrast, is marked by an attempt to embody the tensions between different knowledge systems – western and indigenous – through strategies of juxtaposition that lead visitors to be aware of the critique of the museum’s role in colonial practices and the privileging of the indigenous voice and perspective in response to these practices. Both models, Phillips suggests are motivated by a politics of restitution, of making up for, if not reversing, what happened during the colonial encounter moment. However, the community-based model she argues, runs the danger of erasing the museum’s own involvement resulting in an occlusion of the museum’s own achievement and thus sabotaging the public’s ability to recognize and appreciate it. Multivocal exhibitions on the other hand, run the risk of confusing visitors by representing a politics of reconciliation that is not yet evident out there in the community. If the former runs the risk of too much homogenization, the latter runs the risk of the alienation of the general public from its revisionist aims.

AUSTRALIAN BACKGROUND

In Australia, the principle that indigenous people had a right to their cultural property and therefore the right to decide how it is interpreted was established in the 1990s, with the first version of an official policy for dealing with indigenous communities by the professional association Museums Australia known as *Previous Possessions/New Obligations* (1993). One of its most significant points was the desire to deal with indigenous culture not as something that belonged in the past but as something that was alive, diverse and continually changing in the present. Thus the dominant narrative of the colonial encounter, that indigenous people would not survive and their culture was doomed to extinction, was explicitly contested in the very spaces that first produced it. Part of this contestation was the emergence of a museum exhibition practice, which, along with giving voice to indigenous people and supporting their claims to land and basic human rights, also critiqued the museum institution itself.

The first suite of exhibitions in the Bunjilaka Centre at the Melbourne Museum in 2001 is an example of this. Its mainly indigenous curators went to great lengths to both contextualize and critique previous museum practices using the strategies of juxtaposition mentioned by Phillips as being key to

the multivocal model of collaboration as well as to incorporate direct community voices. Thus in an exhibition called *Two Larvas* (2002-2012), the vastly different cultural context of Sir Baldwin Spencer, the Museum's first Director and an anthropologist who worked extensively with indigenous communities in Central Australia, was juxtaposed with that of Irrapmewe, an elder of the Arrente People. The irreconcilability of their world-views was the focus, though hope was also established by their mutual respect for one another. Spencer himself was then "collected" by the curators who put him on display in a glass cabinet alongside the material he collected. The point then was to demonstrate that the museum had moved on, and it was now much more understanding and respectful of indigenous people and their cultural property and knowledge. This was evidenced by the different approach in the *Belonging to Country* (2002-2011) exhibition in which first person voice was used extensively. This exhibition was particularly strong on post contact indigenous culture and history, using personal testimony to make the point that there had been resistance, cultural traditions continued and a distinct indigenous culture existed in the present. The political aims then were one of critique of the museum and its past practices, a celebration of indigenous survival despite enormous trauma and a demonstration that the museum had changed. This suite of exhibitions then, exhibited characteristics from both models advanced by Phillips, providing within the same space a celebration of indigenous survival and a critique of past museum practices.

FIRST PEOPLES

While similar in its privileging of narrative and its attention to the importance of Country to indigenous people, *First Peoples* is different in two ways. Firstly, it no longer has to make the argument for change within the museum – it simply operates differently and goes about embodying that difference in its exhibition practices. This does not mean however, that it can be understood instead as a community-driven exhibition in the way that Phillips describes this model. This is because the aim is not simply to explain indigenous cultures through indigenous voices and for indigenous people. As important is also the aim of sharing that culture so that the impact of the colonial encounter can first of all be understood, and then dealt with by both indigenous and settler communities in ways that forge a new political settlement – one based on a proper treaty. In working from a contact perspective, Museum Victoria has taken on the moral and ethical responsibility that the indigenous communities requested it take on and done so in a way that encourages all visitors to the exhibition into making that same choice. How it does that, is what I will try to explain next.

Before I begin though, it is necessary to offer some description of the process of collaboration itself and the aims of those involved in it. While Bunjilaka has, from its inception in the late 1990s, always aimed to work with indigenous communities and become a place for the communication of their perspectives to both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences, the development of the *First Peoples* exhibition represents a high point in the relations between the museum and indigenous communities in the state of Victoria. No longer content with the consultative model based on the existing reference group for the gallery, they chose to elevate the status of the reference committee so that they could collaborate much more closely and effectively through co-curating the new exhibition, deepening the reach of the Museum into Aboriginal communities in Victoria. To do this the Museum established a new reference group, consisting of fifteen elders and community representatives from around the state. Called the Yulendj, a word from the Kulin language group meaning "knowledge", this group was instrumental in bringing "knowledge, stories, culture, objects and images"² to the Museum, using not only their own knowledge but also facilitating connections with Aboriginal communities throughout the state. For the Museum, the partnership with this group "represents the birth of a new era where Aboriginal peoples and museum staff are working together to interpret the collections and reveal unique stories and knowledge" in ways that "accord with both Aboriginal "Law and knowledge" systems and "western knowledge systems".³ The collaboration involved sharing knowledge and advice across the project team from curatorial and

design to conservation and public programs. The result, from the Museum's perspective, included improved community access to collections, research and identification of collections and the exchange of knowledge and skills between staff and community.⁴

While the Museum mostly describes this relationship in terms of an improved knowledge of the collection, the elders themselves seem much more concerned with the implications of the collaboration for relations between indigenous communities and the museum as well as relations between indigenous people and non-indigenous Australians. In a dedicated Web page to the Yulendj group,⁵ a series of interviews with each elder reveal that all of them thought that the process of exchange was mutually beneficial, indicating their concern with the question of relationships. Brendan Kennedy thought that:

I'm getting as much out of being a part of Yulendj as what I'm bringing. There's a strong relationship now, and that's based on museum staff showing respect to Yulendj members, and Yulendj members imparting knowledge back to museum staff here. I think it's unique. It's setting a new standard.

Many thought that the collaboration enabled them, as elders, to leave a legacy to their people – one in which they could be proud of their heritage, resistance to colonialism and ability to contribute to Australian society.

Just as strong as a narrative of legacy to indigenous Australians was a narrative that expressed a desire of sharing this pride and cultural knowledge with non-indigenous Australians. The aim here was clearly a political one – they wanted non-indigenous Australians to respect indigenous people, their culture and their land. In a way, they wanted us to become more like them. Eilean Alberts, for example, explained that:

I hope to share it with everyone. I hope that non-Aboriginal people, non-Indigenous people of Victoria, will gain a greater understanding of how we care for our land and care for us so that perhaps they'll step on our Country a little more softly and not harm it as much.

The exhibition is, as a result, an induction into indigenous culture for non-indigenous Australians just as much as it is an affirmation of pride in that culture for indigenous Australians.

This double edge to the nature of their work – a desire to do it for both the Aboriginal community and the wider Australian community was seen as an opportunity to address a lack in contemporary Australia's understanding of the past. For Lee Healy for example, who felt this lack in her experience of university in which young indigenous students at Monash University "learn through Indigenous Studies because they've never gone through what I've been through" and in which "A lot of the nonindigenous said they've only learned about the Stolen Generations at high school and that was only a little bit" means that their education:

... needs to go back further than Stolen Generations for them to understand before they get to uni. I think they will learn a lot more walking through *First Peoples* than probably six months of studying Australian history that Captain Cook⁶ was a good fella.

Achieving this however, means recognizing and dealing with the legacy of colonization as well as educating people about the values inherent in indigenous culture. This recognition is not just a matter of knowing the history but acknowledging the depth of trauma that occurred, our own forgetting of our role in this as well as the depth of indigenous knowledge and culture that still exists. Dianne Kerr put this problem sharply in articulating her hope that:

... people realise that yes, First Peoples are still around and we still practise our laws and customs. Hoping that it will bring us some peace as well because we've been scattered around and had children stolen and a lot of horrible things through our history. I think

having someplace where people can go to see a snippet of that history – and ourselves, even bring in our children and grandchildren – will help us heal.

Her hope requires faith however – faith that her people will put aside their previous attitude towards the museum, though she thinks the presence of the Yulendj is already leading towards this. As she says:

Since we've been on this group, I've noticed that the attendance from the Koorie⁷ community has increased. You never went to the museum unless you wanted something – to look in the historical record or you needed some advice – we didn't come in here, a lot of us, to just look. I think when the Koorie community come in and see how represented they are, and every mob's⁸ being represented, it's going to be awesome.

How then, did the Yulendj, together with the exhibition team, go about creating an exhibition that would instil pride within the Koorie community but also speak to the non-indigenous communities in ways that didn't simply shame them but gave them sufficient understanding to begin to have their own pride in indigenous people and their culture and want to create a shared future with them?

At the simplest level, this was achieved by identifying three overall principles that underpin all the choices made in the development of the exhibition. According to both Genevieve Grieves (2013), lead curator for *First Peoples*, and Amanda Reynolds (2013), lead curator for the *Our Story* section that introduces the exhibition, the Yulendj group insisted that the exhibition had to speak with the cultural authority of the Elders, have a focus on the importance of the preservation of language to identity and it had to represent the cultural diversity of the indigenous nations within Victoria while also speaking to themes of continuity. Within this, the connection between people, Country and culture had to come through.

There are many ways in which these principles do come through. The voice of indigenous people is always presented in the first person and they are the dominant holders of knowledge. Whenever western systems of knowledge enter the exhibition, it is always alongside an indigenous one. Key themes are mediated through the voice of the elders involved in the Yulendj group and thus carry their authority. Each subtheme appears under the voice of an elder involved in the Yulendj group. Indigenous language is used whenever a word is known for an object, alongside its western name. It is written as well as spoken and sung. Key cultural concepts are explained and visitors get a clear message that these are still important within indigenous cultural practices and values today. Indigenous people are named as are the communities they live in. A humanized geography and history of indigenous Victoria is thus produced within this exhibition. The structure of the exhibition also supports these aims with a narrative section that introduces indigenous cultural systems, followed by contact history and its aftermath called "Our story" – with 'our' indicating both indigenous and non-indigenous ownership. A section titled "Many Nations" demonstrates the cultural diversity and the continuity of indigenous material culture while the last section, "Generations", speaks to the themes of continuity, community resilience and identity. What I want to argue, however, is that these three principles are embodied in much more than the technical aspects of exhibition design – the structure of the exhibition, the ways in which labels are written, or the use of oral history excerpts in both written and oral form. Far more important are the poetics of the exhibition design and the experience that this engenders for the visitor. For it is these poetics that engender the possibility of understanding, feelings of pride, awareness of the shared difficult histories between indigenous people and those that colonized them as well as of a possible shared future. These poetics are captured by the injunction, given by a virtual representation of an indigenous messenger⁹ that guides visitors through the exhibition to "look, listen and feel".

This injunction points to the ways in which the exhibition privileges sensorial experiences as a means to enter into the encounter the museum and the Yulendj group have jointly produced. That the exhibition is meant to be an encounter is clearly announced by the advertisements around town, whose

main message is replicated in the exhibition entry that welcomes visitors with the word Wominjeka – welcome. Addressing both indigenous and non-indigenous visitors, this word clearly announces a distinct indigenous space, indicating both agency within and ownership of that space. To enter it is to enter into a dialogue with those who produced it and those they represent in doing so. As the label underneath this word at the entry to the exhibition goes on to explain in a strong first person voice, “We welcome you to Victoria. We invite you to share in our culture and stories; to listen and to learn from the First Peoples of this land. Wominjeka. You are welcome.” And at the bottom in smaller print – Language: Boonwurrung and Woi wurrung. The politics of voice and space, then, are the first thing that visitors experience poetically. This is done through an interactive language map that populates the land with indigenous voices. As visitors wave their hands over the “knobs” that represent different language groups over a map of Victoria, the name of the language is spoken. If done en masse an entire chorus of different languages surrounds the visitor. The voices unambiguously announce a relationship to land, making their presence felt in a loud denial of the doctrine of Terra Nullius – a doctrine that denied recognition of indigenous ownership of land and which, in the popular imagination at least, denied even the presence of people on that land. For the map, as well as announcing cultural diversity through the existence of multiple languages also announces a relationship to place – or, more specifically, to Country. As a number of indigenous people then explain in a graphic panel to the side, language shapes their identity and their relationship to Country. The move to record and preserve these languages then, is an act that defies the colonial representation of indigenous people as without culture and without a system of land ownership. The argument is supported by a beautiful backdrop of moving images that depict the Country of the various language groups. In indigenous cultures however, as visitors go on to learn, Country is not just a backdrop, a landscape. It is what sustains life and therefore their identity.

The point is beautifully made in a display on the significance of possum skin cloaks which are traditionally given to each indigenous child with the markings of their Country. They are in fact a book that can be worn, a book that literally envelops them in both the geography and the spirituality of their Country. The connections between the markings on the cloak and a person’s Country are made manifest again through a beautiful set of moving images of the Country represented in one of the few surviving nineteenth century cloaks – images in which the markings of the cloak are imprinted over the landscape, blending into it in an ethereal way so that cloak and Country become one, metaphorically wrapping the elders that speak about its significance into it. There is then, no separation between people, Country and object. They are one. The continuity of this founding principle in present day society is then made clear with a cloak specially made for the exhibition by contemporary indigenous people. In this display, Country becomes embodied and is given a presence that accords it the same status as an object even though technically, it is not materially present. It becomes a character in the story.

This sense of deep connection with Country is then embodied in a multimedia piece representing the creation of the world by Bunjil (Figure 1). Bunjil is an ancestor spirit that, in many of the Victorian Dreamtime narratives and especially in the Melbourne area, is the creator of the world. The installation works to communicate the deep relationship in indigenous belief systems between the land and all that inhabits it from rivers and mountains to animals and people. Onto a kinetic sculpture of Bunjil are projected a series of lights which, as he beats his wings, give the impression that he is creating the world – mountains, rivers, rocks, the ocean, animals and finally human beings. The movement of the wings becomes the movement of waves, of mountains rising up and of animals moving through the land. The sound track, which tells the story in both indigenous and English language, is accompanied by sound effects that eventually create a blending of human voices amongst the sounds of the land. The piece is at once beautiful, mysterious and informative, a creation story equal to any other creation story in the world. Walking out of it, visitors are greeted by an image on a touch screen of a traditionally clad indigenous man. “Touch me”, the screen says. I touch it and the screen materializes into the figure of an indigenous messenger, addressing me directly and instructing me to “look, listen and feel”. Looking, listening and feeling is what I have just been doing in the introductory section, feeling my way into many

of the central messages – indigenous people are still here, they have a strong and vibrant culture and they have a rich spiritual life that binds them to their Country. With these insights I am ready to learn more about their culture.



Figure 1. Bunjil's wing kinetic sculpture in *First Peoples* exhibition, Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum.
© Source and photographer: Dianna Snape Photography

The next section is an introduction to indigenous ways of life on Country, told in first person voice, stressing the mutual relationship between Country and people. These relationships are embodied in objects, in stories and in song, all of which the visitor gets to see, feel and hear. The difference between this exhibition's focus on Country and the old one discussed above is that in this version, Country is given agency, it is elevated into a character in the story that has a religious dimension and is embedded in deep time. Belief systems, technologies, education systems based on oral cultures, all these are communicated via vignettes that use both historical and contemporary material to convey their stories. All of them require visitors to look attentively and feel the depth of this relationship between people and Country. One of the strongest displays in this regard is one that took a series of sketches by Wilhelm von Blandowski¹⁰ found in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin back into the communities whose ancestors were the subject of those sketches. They were then used as a means of visual repatriation in which present day communities revived the cultural practices depicted in the drawings. The visitor experiences the privilege of witnessing this revival by looking at a film of it. However, the film is not simply placed on a touch screen for the visitor to access. The film is displayed at an angle to a showcase showing both original and replica objects featured in the drawings. With three showcases and a magnified copy of one of the original drawings forming the fourth line of a square, the films turn the display into an intimate circle. Visitors have to angle their bodies to see them and they have to peer through a slit, rather like looking out from the window of the stairs going up the tower in a medieval cathedral, where this tiny slit opens the narrow enclosed space into an expansive view that is uplifting at the same time as making you feel tiny. To look into and out into these films is to experience a sensation of enormous privilege at witnessing something private, meaningful and spiritual. We are being handed a gift from these communities.

Having understood these deep connections to Country, visitors are then in a position to understand the magnitude of the impact of colonization when the exhibition shifts from culture into history and particularly into shared time. Given the shock waves that were expressed during Australia's history wars, largely manifested around the use of oral history about massacres of indigenous people at the National Museum of Australia which resulted in the 2003 Commonwealth Review (popularly known as the O'Carroll review) of that museum and the taking down of large sections of the contact story (see Clark and MacIntyre 2003; Witcomb 2009, and Commonwealth of Australia 2003), this exhibition deals with colonization not by focusing on massacres but on the impact of smallpox – a story that, while known, has never been the focus in the way it is here.¹¹ The decimation of the population, ironically by travelling messengers that carried the virus with them unknowingly, was extensive. The display enacts a memorial to those who died, from those in the present, using traditional practices of remembering the dead as well as song in language (Figure 2). What follows is a series of vignettes that talk about the breakdown in the relationship between people and Country, as colonisers moved in and disturbed the livelihoods of communities.



Figure 2. Meen Warrann (smallpox) by Maree Clarke.
© Courtesy Museum Victoria, photographer: Dianna Snape



Figure 3. Treaty and Tanderrum section of *Our Story* section of the *First Peoples* exhibition in Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum. © Source and Photographer: Dianna Snape Photography

These histories however, are given a political edge by a powerful display on an original sin – the unequal signing of a treaty in which no recognition of the fundamental mismatch between the indigenous and western systems of law was recognized (Figure 3). By implication, the task that faces us all is to make that wrong good by enacting a new treaty, one in which First Peoples are recognized as such and which builds a shared future rather than alienating indigenous peoples from their land. The request is implied in the messenger's directions which come just before this display in which, while reminding us to continue to look, feel and listen, he also explains that we are about to "hear some sad stories, stories about conflict, stories about resilience but also about celebration". He goes on to explain that these stories are also our stories. He concludes by saying that "It is for us to walk together, to share these stories, to share this journey".

That a shared future is possible is then demonstrated in other parts of this exhibition where indigenous contributions to the wider Australian society as well as their fight for basic human rights is told through indigenous voices and where the colonizer's voice comes through in the official documents of the day that recognized neither right to land nor the basic humanity of indigenous people. Implied is the notion that there is still much to do. The other two major sections of the exhibition display the variety of indigenous material culture in Australia, with a focus on Victoria, with in-depth digital labels that give equal status to indigenous and western knowledge about these objects, often locating them in story, and a display of photographs all of which have been visually repatriated in a project that gave families a family album they had never seen, and gave the Museum in-depth knowledge of who was in the images and the background to them. When added to the stories the subjects of these images or their descendants gave, the display gives a powerful sense of indigenous pride, continuity and resilience, a sense that is then duplicated in a final multimedia experience in which indigenous people are filmed life-size talking about their identity and relationship to Country.

ANALYSIS

While much more could be said about these displays, the ground for their impact is the way in which the beginning of the exhibition communicates the intensity of the relationships between identity and Country for Australian indigenous people, making what occurred during invasion and then colonization viscerally shocking. We understand the depth of the horror because we have been given some insight into the nature of their culture. The gift of cultural understanding, when followed with contact history, demands a reciprocal gift – a new treaty. In many ways, the exhibition functions like a testimony. And like testimonies, there is an expectation that someone will hear it and respond as Auerhahn and Laub (1990) argued in relation to the testimony of survivors of the Holocaust. In that sense, the gift that we are receiving is a “terrible gift” as argued by Roger Simon (2006) in relation to exhibitions that produce a space for agency on the part of visitors to exhibitions dealing with the Holocaust (see also Witcomb 2010b, 2013). The task of acknowledging that gift has now gone beyond the museum to the rest of society though the Museum is playing a role by staging the encounter that makes the thought possible. And it does so, by working sensorially, by asking us to look, listen and feel rather than telling us outright what to think. This strategy is what I call “pedagogy of feeling”.

This is a term I have developed in conversation with Tony Bennett's (1995) notion of a “pedagogy of walking”. Bennett used this phrase to capture the way in which 19th century displays used an evolutionary narrative, represented through a series of visual sequences, to literally walk the visitor through time and through an ideology of evolution. While it is still perfectly possible to find linear narratives organised to provide a pedagogy of walking in ways that privilege temporal narratives (teleological narratives about the nation, the development of national art schools, human evolution to name a few), I would argue that the kind of immersive, sensorial experience I have been describing, where the aim is to get visitors to feel their way into the subject matter of the exhibition and to take on particular perspectives by feeling empathy for the position of the other – in this case an empathetic understanding of indigenous trauma occasioned by the process of colonisation and a sense that we all have a role to play in creating a better future – has a different quality to it. A pedagogy of walking is limited to vision as its primary sensorial tool. Visitors are asked to look (at objects and images) and read (labels) but not to feel or listen. In this context, vision is not understood as a sense, as an embodied experience. The exercise is a cerebral one, not an emotive or performative one. It is based on rational forms of knowledge and a privileging of information as the primary rationale for the existence of museums (see Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006 for a discussion of vision as essential to the colonial enterprise). Pedagogy of feeling, on the other hand, as its name indicates, is much more open to nonrational forms of knowledge, ones based on other bodily sensations and on emotional forms of intelligence. In this sense, a pedagogy of feeling sits firmly within the realm of affect and is designed to alter one's perceptions of existing knowledge. To that extent, like the pedagogy of walking, it is motivated by the desire to transform the individual.

Its impulse is a reformatory one. Its techniques for doing so and its political aims however, are entirely different. Whereas the pedagogy of walking was designed, according to Bennett, to shape the working classes into viable citizens capable of exercising the vote without upsetting the political status quo, the kinds of examples I am interested in thinking about under the pedagogy of feeling label are designed to support revisionist agendas, and do so by working on the affective dimensions of an exhibition so as to provoke an affective response on the part of visitors.

As I have argued elsewhere (Witcomb 2010b, 2013), these responses are often registered as a form of surprise or shock that is felt in the body. A pedagogy of feeling works by bringing together people's embodied responses to sensorial stimuli with an almost imperceptible processing of their cultural repertoire. Thus for example, the tension I describe above as underpinning the language map that introduces *First Peoples*, is there because the sound of multiple indigenous languages, combined with the visual stimuli of the map and the images of Country behind it clash with my received narrative that Aboriginal languages have mostly disappeared and are no longer owned. I am also accustomed to thinking that for most indigenous Australians, the link with Country and with language is broken. The map is the first sign that I am going to have to reorient many of my received narratives about indigenous people and the impact of colonisation on them. That that realization comes to me through my own kinetic engagement with the installation – I cause the landscape to be peopled and for the language to come into being by passing my hand lightly over the knobs – is also part of the affective experience going on here. As an Australian with forebears going back to the nineteenth century, I am part of the colonising force that dislodged indigenous Australians from their land and from their language. Yet, with the wave of my hand, I am put in a position where I have to rethink my assumption that those links have been broken forever.

A pedagogy of feeling then, works in large part by activating a relationship between sensorial responses and the social space of collective and individual memories. The ways in which it does this though are complex and can be different, depending on who the audience is. Thus, in the language map, my collective memory, as a white Australian is challenged. For indigenous Australians, the affective impact might be quite different however and it may well act to reinforce rather than challenge collective identity, for publicly claiming the continued existence of language is a claim for the existence of a continuous identity. This double-edged nature of its impact, however, is in large part what makes it such a valuable tool to bring different cultural groups together. A pedagogy of feeling is capable of speaking to each of them individually, but also to establish a relationship between them.

Exhibitions that use a pedagogy of feeling then, operate as a site which, in bringing a range of sensorial experiences together with memory, activate the space between material encounters, people and their social environment. Thought about in this way, we can study these processes of activation at the level of the exhibition in much the same way as anthropologists, art historians, cultural geographers and archaeologists are beginning to study the implications of peoples' sensorial relationships with objects (Dudley 2010; Edwards, Gosden and Phillips 2006). The advantage of doing this is that we can begin to analyse not only how exhibitions function as a sensorial landscape or an object in their own right, but we can also reorient our inquiry to take account of the response of the perceiving individual, as Tim Barringer (2011) does for example in his study of the nexus between sound and vision in people's experiences of Imperial pageantry. While here I have used my own body and cultural memory to engage with *First Peoples*, it is obvious that the next stage of developing this notion of a pedagogy of feeling is to engage in ethnographic work with audiences as well as a more detailed study of the strategies that are used to produce it. This is no easy task, however, as the aim here is not only to establish what meanings people make of displays, but how they go about making them and what role the material aspects of the exhibition play in this process – its spatial and aesthetic qualities, the use of immersive environments that encourage sensorial and embodied experiences beyond a cerebral use of vision and so on.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In many ways, what I am describing as giving body to this pedagogy of feeling is itself part of the broader shift identified by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) in the way contemporary democracies work. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Chakrabarty argues, democracy was understood as involving a pedagogical understanding of citizenship, based on the idea that people were not born with political rights but that they earned these through education. In the late twentieth century however, under the influence of various social movements in the 1960s and 1970s and the development of mass forms of democracy with universal enfranchisement, this changed to a performative understanding of how citizenship functions. People were understood as political beings with natural rights to exercising their political nature in ways that were not determined by a formal educational system in which particular kinds of knowledge were prioritised.

For Chakrabarty, key to this was a prioritising of experience over abstract forms of reasoning, allowing more emotional and embodied forms of knowledge to take their place alongside the traditional faith in reason. Museums, Chakrabarty argues, have not been immune from these changes and have had to move away from narratives that prioritised reason or formal systems of knowledge. Instead, they had to respond to arguments such as the right of various minorities to control the ways in which their cultures were represented and to do so in ways that were respectful of, and even embodied, their cultural values and beliefs. And more often than not, this involved prioritising not abstract categories of thought but particular, local and lived forms of experiences that often did not recognise distinctions between the past and the present and did not aim to produce abstract forms of knowledge. They were also forms of knowledge in which both the senses and the emotions were privileged above reason. In doing so, museums stand apart amongst today's educational institutions, in providing their audiences with forms of knowledge production that directly address the needs of contemporary forms of mass democracy for embodied, sensorial forms of knowledge that privilege memory and remembering. What is unique about what I have been describing however, is that this privileging of the performative and the embodied has moved beyond a politics of identity to a politics of empathy, in which cross-cultural understandings are seen as a basic tool for modern forms of citizenship based on the need to deal with past wrongs.

Chakrabarty's arguments are closely related to Clifford's use of the concept of the contact zone in which performance, experience, the local, the enactment of memory, and the collapse between past and present are also prominent. And as we have seen, they are also prominent in *First Peoples*. The exhibition then, is of its time. If its strength is the use of an experiential environment for the task of persuading all on the significance of indigenous Australian culture, the rights of indigenous people and the shared responsibilities that arise out of contact history, its weakness is the need for consensus in the collaborative model that underpins it. For the cultural authority with which the Elders speak cannot point to fractures within the communities they represent. They all speak with one voice. To that extent, there is a romanticisation going on of "community" and of indigenous culture. There are no differences of opinion, no critiques of their social system and so on. For me, the most difficult question this exhibition poses is whether or not to accept the significance accorded to the notion of Country. Given its pivotal role in establishing the ground for the extent to which we need to have a treaty as a basis for reconciliation, what is the impact of this understanding of what it is to be indigenous for those indigenous people who no longer have a connection to Country due to the large scale movements forced upon them by the colonisation process? What are the politics of Country within and across indigenous groups themselves? Perhaps the next stage in collaborative exhibition-making is the need to address difference of opinion within communities – difficult terrain within culturally dominant groups, let alone those fighting for their political and human rights.

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NOTES

- 1 Bunjilaka is the Aboriginal cultural center and Keeping Place at the Melbourne Museum. It incorporates exhibition galleries, meeting rooms, storage facilities, performance and activity spaces and a garden (see Simpson 2006:15.1-15.5 for further information on it).
- 2 See <http://museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/visiting/first-peoples/creating-first-peoples/>
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 This is not to say that the first suite of exhibitions did not work with the community. The focus however, was much broader than Victoria and so not as representative of the variety of communities within the State. Nor was the negotiation over interpretation as extensive. The difference is encapsulated in nomenclature – the first exhibitions had a reference group that worked in consultation with the Museum's Board. The second had a group of elders and community representatives that covered the State between them and who were classed as co-curators working directly with the curatorial staff. Every single decision was workshopped with them.
- 5 All quotes in this section are taken from <http://museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/visiting/first-peoples/yulendj/> (accessed December 16, 2013).
- 6 Note to readers: Captain James Cook (1728-1779) "discovered" Australia for the British Crown and was Australia's first Governor.
- 7 Note to readers: "Koorie" is an indigenous word for Aboriginal people used in Victoria. Other words exist in other parts of Australia.
- 8 Note to readers: "Mob" is a word used by Aboriginal people in Australia to refer to their clan.
- 9 Within indigenous Australian culture, messengers were people who had the authority to travel between clans with a message stick to communicate news. *First Peoples* uses the figure of the messenger as an interlocutor with the audience as well as a trope to signal key moments in the narrative.
- 10 Blandowski was a German zoologist and mining engineer who became the first scientist appointed to the new Victorian Museum in 1854. He made sketches of indigenous communities along the Murray River in Victoria while on an expedition to collect biological specimens, especially fish, for the Museum.
- 11 The lead curator for this section, Amanda Reynolds, was one of the curators in the exhibition that was the subject of attacks from conservatives who accused the National Museum of Australia in dealing with "Black armband history". Weary of possible reaction from conservatives, Reynolds carefully chose to introduce the experience of colonization through one of its unintended impacts – the rapid spread of smallpox to which indigenous Australians had no immunity, as they had never been exposed to it. An accusatory tone is thus cleverly avoided.

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