

Interpreting Shared and Contested Histories: The *Broken Links* Exhibition

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Abstract

The exhibition *Broken Links: The Stolen Generations in Queensland* focused on the history and impacts of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their biological parents in Queensland, Australia between 1869 and 1969. This exhibition is discussed as a case study of “hot interpretation” (Ballantyne and Uzzell 1993), which incorporates emotion into the design of interpretive experiences in order to provoke cognitive and behavioral responses. Visitors’ responses to the exhibition are explored and issues regarding the use of “hot interpretation” techniques are discussed. Five principles are derived for the application of hot interpretive techniques in the context of shared and contested histories, with the aim of encouraging visitors to see their own history from a different perspective.

INTRODUCTION

“I found answers I wasn’t expecting to find. More moving than I ever anticipated.” – A visitor to *Broken Links: The Stolen Generations in Queensland*

“Hot interpretation,” a term coined by Uzzell (1989), is “interpretation that appreciates the need for and injects an affective component into its subject matter” (Uzzell and Ballantyne 1998, 154). In hot interpretation, emotive and challenging interpretive content and experiences are designed to prompt visitors to re-examine their own previously held beliefs and perceptions regarding specific social, environmental, or moral issues (Ballantyne 2003; Ballantyne and Uzzell 1993). Ballantyne explored the application of hot interpretation at the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa to interpret the impact of Apartheid (and in particular the Group Areas Act of 1953) to a mixed audience of ex-residents, local South Africans, and international tourists with a limited knowledge or experience of such events (2003). Ballantyne’s research highlighted the need for hot interpretive techniques to “help international visitors make connections or build bridges between new information and their previous experiences and knowledge” (2003, 290). The use of narratives and personal stories was suggested as a means of both engaging visitors emotionally and providing personal insights into the topics under discussion.

This paper extends this work by considering the application of hot interpretive techniques in the presentation of shared and contested history in the *Broken Links* exhibition in Brisbane, Australia.¹ According to Ballantyne and Uzzell, presenting exhibitions on important cultural, social, and historical issues is one way in which museums can more effectively serve their communities (2011). The *Broken Links* exhibition was a small, temporary interpretive display addressing a controversial and

divisive historical event from a largely Aboriginal viewpoint. Unlike the District Six Museum, where the majority of the audience consisted of ex-residents of the area who had personal experience of the events portrayed, the majority of the audience at the *Broken Links* exhibition was non-Aboriginal and had little personal experience or knowledge of the events that had occurred relatively recently in their own country.

Broken Links aimed to present the highly emotive story of the “Stolen Generations” (the history of Indigenous child removal) in such a way as to challenge visitors to reflect on and question their own attitudes and actions regarding racial tolerance, understanding, and social justice. It’s significant that, unlike the District Six Museum, the intended audience was predominantly one whose prior knowledge and past experience of the events portrayed might differ from the perspective presented in the exhibition. The challenge for the *Broken Links* exhibition designers, therefore, was how to facilitate a shift in visitor perspective and acceptance of an alternative viewpoint, without creating negative reactions that might be counterproductive. This paper explores the role of interpretive techniques in helping to achieve such an outcome. In particular, it reveals the ways in which a hot interpretation of contested history can facilitate visitor emotional engagement through a reflective process leading to a reassessment of personal perspectives, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Ballantyne, Packer, and Sutherland 2011).

Shared Histories

Within the Australian context, the term “shared history” reflects the fact that since 1788, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have shared the same country (Clark 1994). According to Clark, to share history involves changing the way Australian history is constructed and represented. “It involves non-Indigenous Australians identifying with aspects of Indigenous Australians’ cultures and histories” (Clark 1994, 1). Developing any exhibition that focuses on shared history is difficult because it exposes a myriad of multiple and overlapping memories (Kattago 1998). In Australia, while the display and interpretation of pre-European culture and lifestyles are an important function of museums, it is also necessary to interpret the positive and negative impacts of European contact, as well as contemporary, living Indigenous cultures (Ballantyne 1995). Through such interpretation, museum audiences can see how European contact has impacted on Indigenous communities historically and influenced the development of such communities today.

The interpretation of shared history is a relatively new phenomenon within Australian museums (Batten 2005). While there have been positive moves by historians to rewrite Australian history to acknowledge the role of Indigenous people in the formation of the Australian nation, such accounts have been slow to filter into the interpretation of museums (Batten 2005). Although many Australian museums display pre-European Indigenous arts and handicrafts, comparatively little attention has been given to recording and presenting post-contact Indigenous history and culture (Byrne 1996-1997). Indeed, when Indigenous heritage and culture has been portrayed in museums, it has often been classified as anthropological or archeological material (Bennett 2004). If on display at all, Indigenous artifacts may be displayed alongside Neolithic collections and not within the context of the contribution Indigenous culture has made in the development of modern Australian society. Such depictions of Indigenous culture strongly reflect past (and even some present) attitudes towards Indigenous peoples, and fail to recognize the dynamic and evolving nature of such communities. Presenting the Australian past as though there was a

period of Indigenous history that was simply superseded by non-Indigenous history at the time of colonization fails to acknowledge the ongoing complex integration of cultures that has occurred over that time (Batten 2005).

Researching Australian interpreters' conceptions of Aboriginal culture and heritage and the implications for interpretive practice, Ballantyne argued for an increased focus on the interpretation of post-contact, contemporary Aboriginal culture and history (1995). Such a focus would mean that interpreters will need to face the dilemmas involved with interpreting controversial issues such as the Stolen Generations, mission stations,² and massacre sites. In this regard, it is suggested that the use of a hot interpretation approach has much to commend it, since it is well-suited to facilitating cross-cultural understandings and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Ballantyne 1995). Adopting such an approach is particularly important when aiming to present contested histories to a mixed audience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous visitors. As one Aboriginal interpreter in Ballantyne's study commented, interpretation from an Aboriginal perspective is needed to help non-Aboriginal Australians "mature and come to terms with facts instead of covering up lies" (Ballantyne 1995, 16).

The controversy surrounding the narration and presentation of exhibitions concerning Australia's shared past (in particular within the context of racial segregation and discrimination) is not only an example of the difficulties associated with historical interpretation, but is also indicative of contemporary Australia's struggle with its own national memory. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges facing museum practitioners is in identifying the "official heritage"—where, more often than not, the opinions of one group (usually the majority group) override the views of the minority group (Richter 2005). At times, the presentation of cultural heritage has been used to reinforce social divisions rather than heal social divides (Bennett 2004).

Obviously, interpretation of shared, contested post-contact Australian history is a hot issue. It is thus not surprising to find that Australian heritage institutions are reluctant to discuss the negative impacts of post-contact interactions: specifically, accounts of the racial segregation or abuses that were experienced by Indigenous people at the hands of the non-Indigenous population. It has only been in the past decade that some museums have attempted to address one of the most negative impacts of European contact for Indigenous communities—the so-called "Stolen Generations."

The Stolen Generations

[T]he Government is not going to allow white and near white children whether their parents are black or white to remain on the settlements at the cost of the taxpayer. You have to educate coloured people to make the sacrifice to have their children adopted and so give them the chance to enjoy the privileges of the white community. —Cornelius O'Leary, Director of Native Affairs, 1960.³

The *Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act* of 1865 allowed Indigenous children to be removed from their parents and sent to industrial or reformatory schools on the grounds of "neglect." This was followed by the *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* of 1897, which allowed government officials to remove Indigenous people to reserves and to separate children from their families

without a court hearing. These acts focused primarily on the removal of “half-castes”—children born of Aboriginal mothers and European fathers. Although ostensibly for the protection of Indigenous children, these measures have also been interpreted as an attempt by commonwealth and state governments of the time to segregate—and in effect “breed-out”—the Indigenous population (Manne 2000, 133). By 1969, all states had repealed the legislation allowing for the removal of Aboriginal children under the policy of “protection.” The term “Stolen Generations” was later used to refer to those children who were removed from their families during this period. Within the State of Queensland alone, approximately one-third of Indigenous people reported that they had either been removed themselves and/or had relatives who, as children, had been removed from their natural family (Taylor 2004).⁴

For many years, Australian education and heritage institutions avoided discussing the issues surrounding these policies. This silence, it is claimed, has been detrimental to the country’s ability to fully comprehend the impact on Indigenous Australian culture, families, and individual identity (Byrne 2003). Furthermore, as Byrne suggests, it has also impacted on the ability of non-Indigenous Australians to understand themselves (2003; 2004). According to Clark, heritage institutions have an obligation to bring these issues to public attention (for example, through public exhibitions), and by doing so, museums have the potential to help audiences (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) come to terms with aspects of Australian history that have for so long remained hidden and ignored (1994),.

Broken Links: The Stolen Generations in Queensland Exhibition

This paper explores the use of a hot interpretive approach in a small, temporary exhibition that was presented between May and September 2007 at the State Library of Queensland. The library presented the exhibition *Broken Links: The Stolen Generations in Queensland* as part of its continued efforts to engage with Indigenous communities. The exhibition was instigated in recognition of the tenth anniversary of the “*Bringing Them Home*” report: a significant report highlighting the history and impacts of the Stolen Generations for Indigenous peoples. This exhibition represented an important collaboration between the State Library of Queensland and local Indigenous communities. After its display at the State Library in Brisbane, the exhibit travelled to other libraries around the State for two years. It was viewed by approximately 95,000 visitors in Queensland.

“*Broken Links: The Stolen Generations in Queensland*” was an informative, thought provoking, and emotionally challenging exhibition that graphically displayed the history of forced removals and their impact on Queensland’s Aboriginal⁴ communities.⁵ The focus of the exhibition was the personal stories of five Aboriginal Queenslanders who were removed from their families during this period. These were presented using audio, video, and photographic records supplemented by government documents, artifacts, personal letters, and interpretive text. The stories provided detailed, first-person accounts of the harsh conditions Aboriginal children endured as a consequence of government policies. An important aspect of the exhibition experience was the opportunity for visitors to write down comments or impressions about the exhibition and attach these to a blank wall known as the “visitor response wall.” These comments then became part of the exhibition for other visitors to read.

The exhibition portraying the experiences of Queensland’s Stolen Generations provided a unique opportunity to explore how hot interpretation could be used to

facilitate visitors' consideration of alternative perspectives to their previously held understandings.

METHOD

The aim of this research was to collect qualitative data that provided an insight into visitors' responses to the exhibition. Visitors to the *Broken Links* exhibition were thus asked a series of open-ended questions regarding:

1. Their reasons for visiting the exhibition.
2. Their expectations of the exhibition content.
3. Their cognitive and emotional responses to the exhibition.
4. The impact of the exhibition on their attitudes towards issues in relation to the Stolen Generations.
5. The parts of the exhibition that made the greatest impression on them.

The study was conducted during the last two weeks that the exhibition was on display at the State Library. (It was subsequently re-developed as a touring exhibition.) Visitors were approached by a volunteer as they completed their visit and were invited to answer an open-ended written questionnaire. Further invitations were sent by email through the library's mailing lists. A total of 50 visitors provided written responses to the open-ended questions (27 on-site and 23 by email). Almost three-quarters of the participants were female (74 percent); most were local residents of Brisbane (68 percent), with a small number of responses from other parts of Queensland or from other states. Six of the 50 participants identified themselves as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Over half of all visitors were aged 50 years or older (born before 1957), and thus would have grown up at a time when Aboriginal children were still being removed from their families (the legislation was repealed in 1969). This group of visitors in particular would have "shared history" with the stolen generations.

Although the number of participants was small, the data was rich in detail. The data was analyzed with a number of purposes in mind:

1. To understand visitors' expectations as they approached the exhibition.
2. To search for evidence of visitors becoming aware of, reflecting on, or accepting alternative perspectives on their shared history.
3. To understand the processes underlying a shift in perspective.
4. To identify interpretive strategies that contributed to this process.

The analysis also incorporated comments provided by visitors on the Visitor Response Wall, when these were relevant to the purposes listed above.

RESULTS

Visitors' expectations

Many of the visitors who participated in the study had entered the exhibition because they were interested in the topic or wanted to learn more:

I wanted to know more about this crucial and frighteningly recent part of our history. —*non-Indigenous 20-29-year-old male from Brisbane*

I spent my married life on the land (graziers) and we always employed a number of local Aborigines so I am always interested in them. —*non-Indigenous 70-plus-year-old female from Brisbane*

I want to learn more about Aboriginal people. These stories are important and need to be told. —*non-Indigenous 30-39-year-old female from Brisbane*

Others had come across the exhibit by accident and had wandered in out of curiosity.

Because I was walking past and I thought it looked interesting. —*non-Indigenous 18- or 19-year-old male from another part of Queensland*

Visitors perceived the exhibition as a good opportunity to learn more about the Stolen Generations, both for themselves and their families.

I brought my children so it's not just from me that they hear these things. When I was little, we would hide some of the Aboriginal kids so that no one in town could find them. We were “poor white trash” so nobody paid much attention to us. Mum was pretty racist, born in the [19]20s but she thought a child deserved its mother. —*non-Indigenous 40-49-year-old female from Brisbane*

Evidence of a shift in perspective

Given the graphic descriptions of the harsh conditions Aboriginal children endured, it was not surprising that many of the visitors reported being deeply affected by the *Broken Links* exhibition. Many commented that the exhibition had given them an insight into the personal experiences of those who had been removed from their communities. Participants' comments indicated that most had accepted the new perspective on their shared history that was presented in the exhibition. They acknowledged the “unjust and criminal” policies that led to Aboriginal children being taken from their families. Being made more aware of the conditions many of the removed Aboriginal children were forced to endure made many participants more “sympathetic” to Aboriginal issues and more critical of the Australian government's handling of the situation. Many participants acknowledged how important it was for contemporary Australians to understand this history.

I still think the majority of the population do not understand what happened with the removal of children and the consequences—these stories help us understand what really happened and how people were affected. —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old male from Brisbane*

Visitors' comments suggested that while they had been aware of the Stolen Generations as a concept before visiting the exhibition, most had little knowledge of the politics behind the removal of Aboriginal children, or the conditions those children were forced to endure. Participants expressed surprise at how relatively

recent these events and policies portrayed in the exhibition were, and dismay at their own lack of awareness.

I have a real experience to put up against what seemed like a fanciful story. —*non-Indigenous 40-49-year-old female from Brisbane*

I was dismayed about how recent the stories are. How repressive the legislation and regulations were. How absolute the power of white authorities appeared to be over the details of individual lives. —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old female from Brisbane*

This should be compulsory Australian history for school students. I never learned it at school and I graduated high school in the last decade—how tragic. —*non-Indigenous 20-29-year-old female from Brisbane*

There was recognition among participants that the removal of Aboriginal children from their families was not only historically important, but also had consequences and impacts on issues of relevance for all Australians today. Participants' comments indicated that the exhibition had prompted them to reflect, not only on issues regarding the Stolen Generations, but also current issues affecting Indigenous people and other minority groups.

[I learned] that even today, Indigenous people's lives are so deeply affected by the fracturing of families and relationships, and the limits to education and opportunity provided to the separated children. —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old female from Brisbane*

I now want all the money that is held in Indigenous coffers to be given back in a way that will help Indigenous People. —*non-Indigenous 40-49-year-old female from Brisbane*

The exhibition reinforced my views that mainstream Australia has to come to terms with this part of our shared history. Also made me think about how we (as a population) continue our tendency to continue to ignore the plight of contemporary “others” in our society, e.g., the incarceration today of so called illegal migrants including children. In the future, we as a society will have to deal with the harm that these policies will have caused to this group of people. —*non-Indigenous 60-69-year-old female from interstate*

Factors facilitating a shift in perspective

Comments made by people who were most affected by the exhibition shed some light on the factors that facilitate the changes in perspective discussed above. The exhibition had a particularly powerful effect on two groups of visitors: non-Indigenous people of a similar age to the Indigenous people whose stories were presented; and both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who had experienced some form of separation from their own biological families, through adoption or relocation.

For visitors of a similar age to those depicted, the exhibition shone a new light on events in their own lifetime—events of which they were previously unaware. These visitors were able to form an immediate personal connection with the narratives as they compared their own experiences of growing up in Australia in the mid-twentieth century. As a result, many of these visitors developed a greater respect and admiration for their Aboriginal compatriots.

Some of the people featured in the exhibition are the same age as me and I, and many others of my generation, had no idea that this practice was occurring at the time. —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old female from Brisbane*

I am much more aware of what happened. These were ordinary people, like me and my family. —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old female from Brisbane*

It made me realize I was growing up when all this was happening—how would I or my family have survived?” —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old female from Brisbane*

The exhibition made me feel very sorry, but also very lucky for my own upbringing. It made me more respectful of the people who bore those injuries and remain wonderful, compassionate people. —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old female from Brisbane*

Those who had experienced some form of separation from their parents were also able to form personal connections not only with the narratives, but also the people behind them:

I am an adopted person, to this day I still do not know where and who my father was. The feeling of misplacement and disconnection has had a powerful influence—personal power has needed to be found again. Bless you for your amazing courage, wisdom and your ability to grow in strength and dignity after all the abuse. Your deep spirituality speaks to me. —*comment from Visitor Response Wall*

Having only recently learned the truth about my heritage this exhibition has gone a long way in helping me forgive my grandparents who moved away from our community and created the tale that we were of Maori heritage. I have a clearer understanding of my grandmother’s motivations for denying our Aboriginality. Having read the stories of the people profiled I feel I can appreciate the fear she must have felt and the strength of spirit that had her move the family to Brisbane under a new identity. Thank you. —*comment from Visitor Response Wall*

It might thus be surmized that one of the important keys to the effectiveness of hot interpretation is its ability to support the formation of personal and emotional bonds between the visitor and the storyteller—the observer and the observed. This process is likely to be supported by highlighting as much as possible the similarities

between them, thereby facilitating empathy between visitors and those whose experiences are being interpreted. Thus visitors are led to imagine themselves in the place of the other; to experience the world through the other's eyes; to experience the feelings and perceptions of the other; and to develop an understanding of their situation. The development of feelings of empathy through the use of a hot interpretive approach led many to report that the exhibition promoted understanding and "reconciliation":

The stories provide an inside-out understanding for the need for reconciliation.
—*non-Indigenous 20-29-year-old male from Brisbane*

It moved me deeply which motivated me to do something about it. If we ignore the issue a divide will always exist. We won't forget—we need to acknowledge and try and reconcile. —*non-Indigenous 20-29 year old male from Brisbane*

The more awareness we have, the more compassion and understanding evolves. —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old female from other part of Queensland*

INTERPRETIVE STRATEGIES

Participants' comments revealed a number of principles that need to be considered in designing exhibitions based on hot interpretation. These included: the central place of personal stories; the need to balance despair and hope; the need to balance education and persuasion; providing a place for reflection; and focusing on the past to inform the future.

Personal stories

Participants were asked to comment on what aspects of the exhibition made the greatest impression on them. For the majority, personal accounts (stories) provided by those who lived through the Stolen Generations experience left the largest impression. Personal stories helped visitors "engage" with the experiences and feelings of others. Many participants made the comment that while they were aware of these events (either through school or through the media) they had never "connected" personally with them or related such experiences to their own history or concerns. Listening to the audio commentaries, viewing images, and being able to see or read surviving documents and artifacts enabled visitors to "personalize" the experiences and events portrayed in a way that had not been possible previously.

The personal accounts were very moving, reading the letters, seeing their handwriting, and reading quotes brought home the feelings in such a personal way. —*non-Indigenous 20-29-year-old male from Brisbane*

Thanks to those who have shared their painful stories. I will think often of Pamela Croft particularly, of a life so founded in antitheses: love and violence, repression and creativity, false traditions and true ways of living. My prayer is that we will value sharing of such intimacies, judge them for what they really are, and respond actively. —*comment from Visitor Response Wall*

These personal accounts made the experience less academic or “historical”; they added a level of authenticity. Through the use of emotion in stories, what is often perceived as “impersonal” history is translated into personal experience (albeit it second-hand). Similar conclusions have also been reported by Czikszenmihalyi and Hermanson who noted that people are often drawn to exhibits containing diaries and personal letters because they connect people with another’s feelings (1995).

The greatest impression on me was from the letters/documents regarding people's/children's lives—so much control, so little compassion or care. The direct quotes or information panel because first person makes the story more real. —*non-Indigenous 30-39-year-old female from Brisbane*

The exhibition makes the separation experience so personal. No one could hear those stories and not be moved to a determination to not allow such things to happen again. —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old female from Brisbane*

Balancing despair and hope

A number of participants commented on the sadness and anger they felt when at the exhibition. Participants also described feelings of guilt and shame with regards to both the events portrayed historically and the continued refusal of subsequent governments to apologize to the Aboriginal people for the injustices caused (and still being caused) by such policies. (It should be noted that in February 2008, five months after the exhibition closed, Australia’s Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered an apology to all Aboriginal Australians and the Stolen Generations for the “profound grief, suffering and loss” inflicted by these laws and policies. The groundswell of public opinion preceding this historic event is evident in visitors’ responses to the Broken Links exhibition.)

I am very ashamed of the previous generation. Also concerned that we are doing things now which our children and children's children will find unacceptable. —*non-Indigenous 60-69-year-old male from interstate*

It made me cry—enough said. —*non-Indigenous 20-29-year-old male from Brisbane*

However, for the majority of visitors, the sadness and anger felt over the events depicted were balanced with feelings of hope and admiration for the Aboriginal people. In particular, participants discussed the resilience of Aboriginal people in their ability to survive in the face of such extreme adversity and hardship. Thus it is concluded that when the topic or event being interpreted is likely to be distressing to visitors, providing a balancing, positive perspective may help to provide visitors with a way of dealing with their feelings and find a way forward.

The story of the Stolen Generations is one of incredible survival against great odds. The “great odds” were covered well, but the hope and future were not in balance. Not everyone has accepted that this is a part of our history, but for those who have, we need an opportunity to celebrate the continuity of this culture. —*non-Indigenous 60-69-year-old female from other part of Queensland*

In one way depressed, at another level hopeful that things will eventually change and in some ways they already are. —*non-Indigenous 60-69-year-old female from other part of Queensland*

Balancing education and persuasion

Mostly, visitors considered the exhibition to be educational, and supported its role in bringing these issues to the attention of the public. Supplementing personal stories with historical detail in official government documents and letters was one way that the exhibition approached this. The use of official documents “authenticated” the experiences of the individuals being interpreted. However, two participants felt that the exhibition had tried to be too persuasive. They felt that the exhibition relied too heavily on emotional accounts in an attempt to “sway” visitors’ opinions towards a particular political point of view.

There is a very fine line between leading a visitor to water and making them drink. This exhibition—in the fine detail—overstepped the line by leading visitors too directly to what their response should be. —*non-Indigenous 60-69-year-old female from other part of Queensland*

I have always believed the word “stolen” is incorrect. They were originally removed (the children) for their safety—abuse etc—but I do know that there are bad eggs in the white population as well. . . . I feel the present Labor Govt is making the most of all this just to win Government. The exhibition of comments “on the pegs” is definitely Labor inspired. —*non-Indigenous 70-plus-year-old female from Brisbane*

According to Uzzell (1998), heritage interpretation can be inherently divisive. For interpretation to be a “force for change” it needs to be as strong as the forces it is designed to counter (Uzzell 1998, 23). Certainly, as the above comments indicate, the *Broken Links* exhibition provoked strong emotional reactions among participants. The exhibition was designed to present an accurate and honest portrayal of the experiences of the Stolen Generations, and to promote reconciliation and healing by presenting personal accounts of the Stolen Generations. The exhibition was not perceived by designers to be supportive of any political party or political view. However, if the perception of balance is lost, the educational value of the exhibition will likely be diminished.

Providing a place for reflection

The Visitor Response Wall was an important aspect of the *Broken Links* exhibition because it allowed visitors to consider and reflect on the exhibition content in relation to their own lives and experiences, a technique that has been

demonstrated to facilitate learning and attitude change (Ballantyne 2003). In fact, Ballantyne et al. suggest that, in the context of wildlife tourism experiences, reflection is often the “missing link” between experience and action (2011). Reflection or introspection was highlighted by Pekarik, Doering, and Karns as an important aspect of the museum experience (1999). One of their findings was that visitors value introspective experiences, where the visitor turns to feelings and experiences that are essentially private (Pekarik et al. 1999, 158). According to Pekarik et al., visitors take on the experience as a journey of introspection, and this experience is prompted by objects or aspects within the exhibition.

The Visitor Response Wall not only offered visitors the chance to reflect on their responses, but also allowed them to become a “part” of the exhibition. By leaving a physical impression behind, other visitors were able to view how these events have impacted on contemporary Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. As Kelly notes, visitors are more than willing to engage with controversial material, providing they have an opportunity to contribute to their own “meaning-making” by being able to voice their opinions to exhibition staff and/or other visitors (2006).

One possible complication, however, is that visitors’ comments may not be in keeping with the “balanced” approach taken by the exhibit designers (as evidenced in the final quote in the section above). This is one of the issues that might arise when adopting a “hot” interpretation of controversial topics—some people can feel very angry and vent their feelings on the Response Wall. It is important, however, when “hot” comments and reflections are displayed on the Response Wall that they are left there—visitors need to have the freedom to express their own perspectives even if they offend some others. Offensive comments can challenge others to reflect on their own views and also to appreciate the complexity of the issues. This is clearly something that needs to be considered carefully by the institution. Some institutions will feel the need to control the way in which opinions are expressed, but there may sometimes be a fine line between “protecting” the visiting public and censoring free speech.

Focusing on the past to inform the future

Just as it is important to balance a sense of despair with hope, so it is important to focus not only on the past but also on the future. How can visitors make sense of distressing events and learn something that will be of value in their own lives? Participants in this study acknowledged that an understanding of the past should lead to better decisions in the future.

Not all aspects of our history in this country are about explorers, success with farming the land and sports heroes, we must hear how the Aboriginal people were treated to fully understand where we are today. All the past atrocities must be understood now for us to proceed as a civil society. —*non-Indigenous 50-59-year-old male from Brisbane*

Sorry cannot convey enough the deep remorse, regret and shame that we feel for the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, their home and their land. Thank you for sharing your stories. Australia’s true history needs to be taught to all Australians. We cannot begin to forge toward the future if we fail to understand our past. We cannot

understand and appreciate race relations in Australia today if we are ignorant to the events that have led us here. We need to educate, understand and acknowledge this history so that we NEVER repeat the mistakes of the past. We must ask ourselves how far have we really come when in 2007 our government is continuing to introduce policies which segregate and discriminate against the real Australians—for this I am sorry. —*comment from Visitor Response Wall*

CONCLUSION

The *Broken Links* exhibition provides an example of the use of hot interpretation to bring about new understandings and perspectives in the context of shared and contested histories. The use of narrative, personal stories, and evocative photographs was found to be a particularly powerful means of engaging visitors and enabling them to find personal connections with the issue and the people affected by it. Although a range of people attended the exhibition, including both those who had a personal interest in the topic and those who had just wandered in out of curiosity, the use of personal stories seemed to appeal to all.

Visitors responded to the exhibition both emotionally and cognitively. Some expressed a sense of personal connection and identification with the Indigenous people whose stories were told. This was particularly the case for those who felt they had something in common with them, such as the context of their childhood in 1950s Australia, or the experience of being separated from their own heritage. Others seemed to have reflected deeply on the issues and were able to apply their learning to their own lives and other contemporary issues.

Five principles were identified that may serve to guide the application of hot interpretation techniques when dealing with controversial and emotional issues:

1. Narrative and personal storytelling should occupy a central place in hot interpretation and should provide multiple points of personal connection with visitors—the purpose of ‘hot’ stories is to provide information and encourage insight into the differing perspectives and experiences of others.
2. Despair should be balanced with hope, providing visitors with a way to deal with their feelings and move forward.
3. Presentation of historical evidence and balanced interpretation should leave visitors feeling educated, rather than persuaded.
4. Providing a place or space for reflection should encourage visitors to personalize and internalize their learning.
5. Focusing on the past to inform the future should provide visitors with a way of learning from the mistakes of others and contribute to building a better future for all.

Further research is needed to explore the application of hot interpretation in a range of different contexts, dealing with different controversial issues and with different visitor groups. In this way, the principles proposed here can be tested and extended, thus contributing to our understanding and practice of the art of interpreting difficult and contentious topics.

Notes

1. This exhibition was curated by Doreen Mellor, National Library of Australia and Alison Wishart, State Library of Queensland. It was developed in consultation with an Indigenous Reference Group, and many Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders who contributed their ideas and advice and assisted the State Library of Queensland to select images. The exhibition was displayed in the State Library for just over four months. When the State Library of Queensland became aware of the powerful impact the exhibition was having on visitors, it requested the authors to undertake an evaluation. The data presented here was collected as part of that evaluation.
2. Mission stations were established by the government and operated by the church to provide food, shelter and education to Indigenous people. Various “Aboriginal protection acts” passed in the late nineteenth century gave the government the power to remove Indigenous children from their families. Many were subsequently relocated to reserves and mission stations. The mission stations may have assisted the physical survival of Indigenous people but in the process undermined the culture and independence of the people.
3. Cornelius O’Leary, Director of Native Affairs, 1960, cited in *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, 1997, 71.
4. According to the 2006 census, the Indigenous population of Queensland was 127,591, approximately 3.5 percent of Queensland’s population.
5. Australia has two Indigenous peoples: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Although the policies and events surrounding the Stolen Generations applied to both groups, this exhibition focused only on Aboriginal communities in Queensland.

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