

## Contact Zones, Third Spaces, and the Act of Interpretation

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### Abstract

The conceptual understanding of museums as 'contact zones' has been widely appropriated in the museum literature and beyond. But the discussion lacks empirical insights into actual experiences: What does 'contact' *mean* for the person experiencing it? How is it *lived*, *negotiated* and *contested*? Drawing on a long-term narrative study of global visitors to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), this paper offers an empirical interrogation and theoretical refinement of the 'contact zone'. It moves beyond the more usual focus on museological production by shedding light on the meanings made by museum visitors. This paper augments current normative and theoretical approaches with an ethnographic study of processes of intercultural mediation during cross-cultural encounters, translation and dialogue. This is done through a hermeneutic analysis of visitors' acts of interpretation that facilitates an understanding of 'cultural action' in 'contact zones' as an interpretive ontological endeavour of the *shifting Self* within a *pluralist cosmopolitan space*.

**Key words:** Contact Zone, Third Space, narrative, hermeneutics, cosmopolitanism

### Introduction

James Clifford's (1997) application of Mary Louise Pratt's (1991) notion of 'contact zones' to a museological context in order to argue for museums as places of contentious and collaborative relations and interactions, has been extensively debated over the last 15 years. On the one hand, this conceptual vision has been critiqued as being merely a reconstruction of the reformist agenda and citizenry technology of the state (Bennett, 1998). On the other hand, more contextualized and historicized research has shown that a museum can function as a site where a complex web of demands and articulations is expressed, negotiated and contested (Macdonald, 2002, McCarthy, 2007, Witcomb, 2003). A recent conference devoted to *Revisiting the Contact Zone: Museums, Theory, Practice* (Linköping, 17–21.07.11) reflected the ongoing, multifaceted and controversial influence of the concept on museum theory and practice. Other perspectives in the literature have also revisited the 'contact zone' by critiquing content and form of museological collaboration (Boast, 2011), and the relationship between process and product (Lynch and Alberti, 2010) in particular museum contexts.

However, all of this literature looks at the issues from the perspective of museum practices. In contrast to these approaches, this paper considers instead the 'contact zone' as an *experience* by museum visitors. By *humanizing* the 'contact zone' through interpretive actions, movements and performances made by museum visitors, or cultural actors, I am able to open a hermeneutic terrain of cultural negotiation and contestation. This paves the way to understanding how different subjects or human actors engage in the process of cultural world-making, a process, which, I argue, always starts with an *act of interpretation* (Schorch, 2010). While institutional and structural critiques certainly deserve their role in academic investigations, it is important to keep in mind that, in Clifford's (1997: 198) words, 'a wholly appropriate emphasis on coercion, exploitation, and miscomprehension does not, however, exhaust the complexities of travel and encounter'. This paper addresses this complexity through an *in-depth* and *long-term* understanding of the visitor's museum experience without, however, neglecting

the interrelated dynamics of museological production and representation.

The case study for my argument is the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) and its bicultural policies, practices and programmes. Surveying Te Papa's bicultural experiment in detail is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. It is worth highlighting however, that, given the complexity of human affairs, 'biculturalism' has never been a linear, one-dimensional and superimposed ideology by *the* state, but is instead the dynamic outcome of the 'war of position' in the fluid, ambiguous and indeterminate spaces that Homi Bhabha (1994) calls the 'in-between'. Conal McCarthy (2007, 2011) for example, has shown how the remarkable encounter of Māori and Europeans unfolded throughout the colonial cultures of display in museums, ultimately leading to Māori control and ownership of Māori collections and exhibitions. Today, Te Papa is committed to developing as a bicultural organization based on the principle of partnership enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between the British Crown and Māori. The Treaty is widely regarded as the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand; and, after decades of negligence, it has gained constitution-like status in recent years. Concrete policies and practices such as Mana Taonga (living spiritual and cultural links between material treasures and people) and Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) ensure Māori participation and involvement in the museum (Hakiwai, 2006, Smith, 2006).

### Theoretical framework

Clifford's (1997) 'contact zone' concludes with the problem of 'translation'. This is a problem that Bhabha (1994: 1) had already theorized as 'moments' or 'processes' in the 'articulation of cultural differences', which can be used to provide a distinctive and particularly useful perspective on 'cultural action' (Clifford, 1997), paving the way from the physical place of encounter to the discursive space of dialogue. Bhabha's (1994: 2) work expands on the border experience, the 'liminal space', and illuminates the 'interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference' which are further magnified in the 'cosmopolitanized' (Beck, 2006) life world of our time. By offering 'cultural difference as an *enunciative* category', Bhabha (1994: 60) opens a hermeneutic terrain of cultural negotiation and contestation without resorting to the last bastion of binary oppositions, which are produced by the inherently essentializing concept of 'a culture'. This throws open the door to cultural world-making, a process which always begins with an act of interpretation. With the help of Bhabha then, I can lay the theoretical foundation for the empirical exploration of 'cultural action' as 'interpretive contests' (Said, 2003) and their 'articulation' or 'enunciation' in 'contact zones':

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilised in the passage through a Third Space. (Bhabha, 1994: 36)

The intervention of the 'Third Space', Bhabha (1994: 37) continues, 'makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process', which echoes the hermeneutic phenomenon of 'polysemy' (Ricoeur, 1981) and exposes any claim of cultural purity as an impossibility even before unearthing empirical evidence. Consequently, 'the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity' (Bhabha, 1994: 37). Bhabha (1994: 37) further argues that 'even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew'. In other words, there is no *a priori* in the 'mind-constructed world' (Dilthey, 1976) apart from the mind itself. Further inspecting the dialogical 'processes', Bhabha (1994: 228) concludes that the 'moment' of 'translation' is the '*movement* of meaning'. But how can we empirically dissect the 'processes' in the 'articulation of cultural differences'?

### Methodological framework

I argue for a narrative construction of meaning and Self through discursive actions, movements and performances (Schorch, forthcoming). Consequently, the research informing this article required hermeneutics as methodological tool and interpretation as its analytical method. By employing narrative hermeneutics, I shed light on the dynamic interrelation and interdependence

of 'action', 'narrative', 'meaning' and 'Self' while humanizing Te Papa as a 'contact zone' through ethnographic research on global visitors and their acts of interpretation (Schorch, 2010). Anthony Giddens (1987) emphasized the inherently 'double hermeneutic' nature of the social sciences which produce, according to Bauman (1978: 234), 'a reflection on practices which are themselves self-reflective'. This study engages in such a double mediation or 'double hermeneutics', a reflective interpretation first by the interviewees and subsequently by me.

A narrative hermeneutics allows us to investigate the relationship between the psychic and the social as mutually constitutive dimensions of any interpretive performance (Redman, 2005). By illuminating these 'spiralling exchanges' and their 'inescapable hybridity' (Redman, 2005), I argue that, without using formalist and deterministic reductions, we can find answers to the open question 'why it is that certain individuals occupy some subject positions rather than others' (Hall, 1996: 10). I concur with Stuart Hall (1996: 14) who stresses the remaining 'requirement to think this relation of subject to discursive formations as an *articulation*', or more specifically a narrative articulation. Such processual understanding of discursive engagements shifts the analytical focus from identities as essential traits to '*identifications*' as positional and strategic performances (Hall, 1996).

In this study, I explored the heterogeneous 'articulations' and 'identifications' expressed through the 'narrative negotiation' and 'performative construction' of Self (Kraus, 2006). This enabled me to humanize abstract totalities such as 'culture' and 'politics' to 'encounter humanity face to face' avoiding the danger that 'living detail is drowned in dead stereotype' (Geertz, 1973: 53, 51). Although clearly being situated within museum studies, I feel that this research is more closely related to ethnographic perspectives investigating the site 'museum' that occur in other academic fields especially anthropology (Bruner, 2007, Gable, 2006, Gable and Handler, 2007).

The primary method chosen to follow the empirical approach was semi-structured and in-depth narrative interviews with a group of global visitors to Te Papa (12 interviewees; four each from Australia, Canada and the USA). Tom Wengraf (2001) proposes a three-stage analytical structure of biographical narrative interviews which was applied in this research. I also used Barbara Pamphilon's (1999) zoom-model to facilitate the exploration of the multiple layers of meanings by focusing on the different levels of narratives. The fact that I conducted follow-up interviews via phone with the interviewees after six months in their respective home environment was crucial for understanding the context-dependent 'endemic fluidity of meaning' (Bauman, 1978). This enabled me to closely investigate the dynamic relationship between meaning and memory, which, according to Lois H. Silverman (1995: 162), 'may be viewed as the core mechanism of meaning-making'. Having translated the theoretical into a methodological framework, I continue my argument with the empirical findings in the following section.

### Cross-cultural journeys: *Bicultural meanings*

I set out to explore the *processes of meaning-making*, the 'growth of meaning' (Johnson, 2007) and 'development of understanding' (Ricoeur, 1981) during cross-cultural encounters. I turn to Julia, a New Zealand born Australian, to begin my exploration of the interpretive processes and moments of cultural world-making throughout the informants' cross-cultural journeys:

I loved the Māori side of it and it's wonderful to see that strength there. **I mean I look at the Aborigines in Australia and it's a totally different culture, you can't compare that, but I think the Māori are in a lot better position as a race in New Zealand than the Aborigines are over there...** I think, yeah Australia has got a lot of work to do really in that regard... I loved the modern side of it as well, like the meeting house down there with all the pretty colours in it and made not out of traditional wood, that was just beautiful. Because to me that shows more integration, it's showing New Zealand as being an integrated country, like we are not talking Māori and Pakeha [a Māori term that was initially granted to white settlers of European descent and nowadays can refer to anyone Non-Māori], we are talking about Kiwis or New Zealanders, which is really good too... It was good to see that side of it, but that didn't dominate. It's a small part of this museum and this is giving it a more, I don't know, **inclusive feel**.

Julia, like any human being, cannot help but place her cultural experience in a context informed by her own discursive environment, the 'reader's world' (Bauman, 1978). Consequently, the perceived integration of Māori and European in New Zealand is related to the apparently worse position of the Aboriginal population in Australia. The fact that Julia, as a New Zealand born Australian, is intimately familiar with the socio-cultural situations in both countries attests to the phenomenon of 'travelling cultures' (Clifford, 1997) in a 'cosmopolitanized' (Beck, 2006) world which goes far beyond the travel encounters interrogated in this study and undermines the imaginary purity of any cultural 'reader's world'. Importantly, Julia highlights the advance of the emotive dimension into the cultural domain manifesting itself as an 'inclusive feel'.

Julia's follow-up interview offers insights into her long-term negotiation of an 'inclusive feel', which merges the *conditions and processes of meaning-making* (Schorch, forthcoming), or feelings and cultural interpretations:

I think it was an important part of my trip and I found the experience really positive...It's good for me; I really enjoyed the cultural aspects of it, the Māori side of it, a lot. Especially the new area where the meeting house was made in a modern way, because **it made me think of the Māori culture not so much as a part of New Zealand's past, but as a living, breathing, evolving entity as well.** Yeah, and it's an integrated part of New Zealand's way of life. Yes, so that was really important to me. I mean I found out afterwards that my father doesn't like that, that particular part of it. He likes seeing it as part of history I guess. Yeah, so that was interesting but **I really enjoyed that feeling of it, still being very much alive and an evolving culture, not just part of history.**

Julia thinks and feels Māori culture as a 'living, breathing, evolving entity' that is 'not just part of history'. In fact, the *dimensions* of 'think[ing]' and 'feeling' culture are tightly interwoven and could never be dichotomized into separate stages. *Cultural feelings* are an under-theorized area of the human experience which are recently gaining attention and which need to be understood in the context of museum visitor studies where they are largely ignored (Schorch, 2012).

By following the thoughts of Bruce from the USA, we can return to the 'reader's world' as the point of origin for the making of bicultural meanings:

When we were sort of booking out our tour around New Zealand, one of the things they did ask us was whether we wanted to do a lot of Māori culture things. **Originally our reaction was sort of like no because I think it's based on our experience with native culture in the United States.** That sort of indigenous culture stuff you get in the United States is very contrived and kind of hokey. **And there is a little bit of feel of imperialism to it that you sort of...you are looking at this culture not as being immersed in it or really trying to understand it, but you are looking at it as being the outsider and 'look isn't that cute'.** You are not; **it makes you feel bad about it is the easy way of saying it.**

In Bruce's case, the discursive foundation of his interpretive community, the 'reader's world', not only affects but also prevents the engagement with the cultural Other. Remarkably, Bruce did not relate to any cultural aspect in the initial interview I conducted with him about his visit to Te Papa. It was only after I asked him how he experienced New Zealand's cultures at the museum in the second stage of the narrative interview (Wengraf, 2001) that he started elaborating on this point in the form of a 'suspicious hermeneutics' (Crossley, 2004) fuelled by the 'experience with native culture in the United States'.

For Michelle, also from the USA, such 'suspicious hermeneutics' amounts to the projection of the Self on the Other. The apparent 'parallel' is only interpreted through her own socio-cultural lens without leaving room for potential variations among colonial experiences:

There was a Treaty that the Māori signed with the British and there was quite a very large display on that...And the guide told us some information about that and how there was a misinterpretation from the English language to the Māori and how it's possible that either they were misled or they misunderstood. And

different people have different interpretations on that depending on probably what cultural group you came from. **So I kind of had the idea that they were really cheated just like the Americans cheated the American Indians...** And we did terrible things to the American Indian including killing them. Well, **I kind of see that parallel here.**

### From bicultural meanings to *cross-cultural dialogue*

We accompany Bruce as he reflects on his visit to Te Papa and discover an interpretive pathway that transforms a 'contact zone' into a dialogical 'Third Space'. Bruce undertakes the journey *from bicultural meanings to cross-cultural dialogue*:

One of the cool things was that according to the tour guide it was basically presented by the Māori not by, you know, a bunch of white guys saying what we present of the Māori, which made a lot more tellable and believable and didn't have this sort of stench of imperialism on it. So it made it a lot easier to sort of, because if somebody is telling about themselves rather than somebody telling about somebody else, we call that hear-say in the law.

Mediated by the tour host, Bruce dares to engage with another world after his initial reluctance. He appreciates the self-representation of the cultural Other, which enables him to overcome the 'feel of imperialism'. Now he is 'not looking at' the Other but is 'immersed' in dialogue facilitating 'understand[ing]' and dissolving the 'bad...feel[ing]' of being an 'outsider'. This is the 'moment' or 'process' that translates a 'contact zone' into 'the production of meaning'. As discussed before, this 'requires that these two places...the I and the You...be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space' (Bhabha, 1994: 36), such that the 'pact of interpretation' or 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer in Ricoeur, 1991) occurs through museological *self-representation*.

Bruce continues:

**There is some sort of indefinable hokeyness that in my experience tends to find its way or can find its way into presentations of non-dominant cultures or any culture really. I mean a non-present culture I guess is what I am talking about. I didn't get the same idea or the same response here.** And I don't know whether that is just because the Māori culture is more alive right now than say the Native American cultures in the United States, and still practicing Māori are involved in it?! **Whereas in the United States there is not really, and I may be completely incorrect on this, but the sort of cultural understanding, the conventional wisdom is there is no real Native American culture left. It's more or less been subsumed into the American culture.**

It is clear that the 'reader's world', in this case the indigenous/non-indigenous discourses in the USA, frame both meaning and dialogue. However, far from being over-determined, Bruce engages reflectively and critically with the Self *through* the Other and admits that 'he may be completely incorrect' with his version of 'cultural understanding' or 'conventional wisdom'. In fact, it is the very mission of the National Museum of the American Indian to contest and revise this 'doxic belief' (Ricoeur, 1992) by simply and purely stating: 'we are alive'. Strikingly, Bruce departs from the specificity of the situation to assume a wider moral stance. He talks about 'non-present cultures' in general and links their alien representation to the 'hear-say' concept 'in the law', his own professional field. The multi-facetedness of the story shows, in Lee Davidson's (2006: 165) words, how 'narrative, identity and morality are irretrievably intertwined: without one another, they wither and die'.

Bruce's admission that 'he may be...incorrect' indicates the ubiquitous opportunity to *reframe understandings*, which offers another passage *from bicultural meanings to cross-cultural dialogue*. To substantiate this point, I turn to the interview with Susan from the USA:

**I never knew** New Zealand was still honouring treaties with their Aboriginal people. That's mind-boggling, mind-boggling! In the United States we broke, I



don't know the actual number, but I am sure we broke more than half of our treaties we signed with the Native Americans. I just came from Australia where **I learned** they actually tried to breed out the Aboriginal people. (paused) You are still honouring, you are still trying to fix ties and honour and give them land.

Susan continues with her pondering on 'treaties' in her follow-up interview. We can observe the motion from bicultural meanings to cross-cultural dialogue through the ongoing reframing of understandings:

I found fascinating that in New Zealand they are still trying to work with the tribes. I found interesting that the indigenous people are still set up in tribes. There are large family groups and tribes and the government is still trying to honour and work with them in the treaties with the tribes. And I can't remember the name of that precious greenstone that is similar and often taken for jade, but it's not jade, how one tribe actually owns all stones found in New Zealand. And in order to use it they have to give royalties to this particular tribe. And I found that really fascinating. Especially coming from the United States where we do honour a few of our treaties but not nearly as well. And we give grants and scholarships, but it's not, it's not quite as prominent.

Susan 'never knew' but 'learned' through reframing understandings. She offers a reflexive example of a 'subjective meaning' as 'internalized interaction' (Ricoeur, 1992). The interview excerpt shows that 'self-knowledge is a dialogue of the soul with itself', or, as Paul Ricoeur (1981: 109-110) puts it, 'an internalized communication'. In this context, Wilhelm Dilthey (1976: 223) discusses 'higher forms of understanding': 'When a person encounters, as a result of his understanding, an inner difficulty or contradiction of what he already knows, he is forced to re-examine the matter.' This reflects John Dewey's 'problematic experience' (Hennes, 2002), which always starts with a *question* as the genesis of growth. Mirroring the circular hermeneutic trajectory of this article, Dilthey (1976: 225) further asserts that 'the objective mind and the power of the individual together determine the mind-constructed world'. To put it succinctly: we simultaneously mediate and are mediated. While we all depend on a 'common sphere' for mutual understanding, it is also clear that 'every mental state represents a new attitude, a new relation of the whole person to things and people' (Dilthey, 1976: 202).

By continuing Dilthey's (1976) line of thought, I argue that 'every mental state' embodies an act of interpretation. This is exactly the 'moment' or 'process' of cultural world-making, a hermeneutic 'turning point' or 'epiphany' (Denzin, 1989). This interpretive agency makes it clear that abstract and theoretical concepts like 'discourse' and 'structure', which reduce historical subjects to incidents of discourse and embodiments of structure, can never exhaustively explain the complexities of encounter in 'contact zones' despite the undeniable power dynamics. And it is also this interpretive agency that is the source of potential resistance to, and subversion of, discursive and structural realities from within.

The clashing of cultures within an exhibition space turns the reframing of understandings into a dialogical necessity. During the remainder of this section, I explore dialogical 'resources' and 'contexts' (Karp, 1991) as fundamental columns of discursive 'Third Spaces' facilitating the interpretive exploration of a 'problematic experience' and leading to 'higher forms of understanding'. I turn to the *narrative tour intervention* as a further pathway *from bicultural meanings to cross-cultural dialogue* and pass the word to Bruce:

...so we hadn't really had a lot to do with it and then **part of the tour** of course in the museum is sort of the **merging of the two cultures**. And **one of the really interesting things that the tour guide talked about** was the, you know, contract between the Māori and the basically British negotiators. **And that sort of gave the, I guess the agreement some sort of a life. And it gave the whole relationship a little more context that we had before...** well I mean part of it was just sort of the **intersection of the two cultures...** I thought it was very interesting because it **seemed like a really genuine marriage of the Māori and the Non-Māori culture**.

We have already seen in this section that the tour host made Bruce understand the self-representation of Māori at Te Papa and facilitated the journey from bicultural meanings to cross-cultural dialogue. The above story offers more details of the dialogical support in the form of a narrative tour intervention which 'gave the...agreement some sort of a life and...the whole relationship a little more context'. The guided tour provides Bruce with the 'resources' and 'contexts' to communicate across cultures converting the 'shock of nonrecognition' (Karp, 1991) into cross-cultural translation, dialogue and understanding.

Mark from Australia, however, struggles with the 'shock of non-recognition' without any narrative contextualization. Consequently, the bicultural architecture of Te Papa remains obscured and Mark is left to construct a confused meaning leaving an unresolved question:

I thought it was a very impressive building design. The Museum in Melbourne that I go to about once every two or three years, you can't really see as much of the building from the outside as you can from this one. And because it's right on the harbour as well. **It almost looks like the front bit has been, like a new bit that has been stuck on to another building!?...Is it all built at the same time because it looks like it's like a different design almost?!**

The interpretive value of context is again shown by Michelle who narrates her experience of Te Papa's contemporary *marae*, or communal meeting place, and allows us to witness the tour intervention's interpretive assistance travelling from the broader 'macro level' of cross-cultural relations to specific negotiations within a particular exhibit:

And then **we joined the tour and the woman who led it was half-Chinese and half-Māori**. I can't even say that very well: 'Māori'... Very, very nice and she spent about an hour-and-a-half with us... I was very impressed with the modern Māori structure that they have there, just wonderful... And then **she told us an interesting use of it**, that it actually is used when someone really important dies and the body is exhibited in there... And I just thought that was really a wonderful way to honour the dead, to do it in that manner. **So those stories were very interesting that the docent told us**. And, you know, **she also told us all the symbolism** in the actual structure of the ancient buildings... it's so different from many things we know in America... The symbolism that I found really interesting was that each panel told the history of a person. And so depending on that design it would tell the story of that person's ancestry. So **she said these only look the same to you, but they are actually different, the designs are different**. And then that was true. We learned, not here, but that the tattooing on the face and the body were all very personalized to that person who was wearing those tattoos.

Michelle's interview offers another example of interpersonal interaction as dialogical 'resource[s]' in a museum 'context[s]'. Neither the 'use' nor the 'symbolism' of the *marae* are yet cross-culturally translatable and understandable within the exhibition setting. This fact was addressed by incorporating such intangible concepts in tour programmes, especially when dealing with non-New Zealand audiences. Note that none of the interviewees referred to *taonga*, a treasure with living human links, which is an integral part of Māori identity (Hakiwai, 2006, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, Smith, 2006), when describing Māori objects but instead used typical terms associated with their interpretive communities such as 'artefacts' and 'art'. At this point, cross-cultural dialogue ruptures since the 'existing categories of knowledge' (Karp, 1991: 22) cannot be 'mobilized in the passage through a Third Space' (Bhabha, 1994: 36). In the case of *taonga*, the depth of its meanings remains locked for the uninitiated.

For Charlotte, another New Zealand born Australian, the tour host herself emerges as the embodied space of cross-cultural contestation:

And it was good that we went through and saw the main points. And I think it gave a good **mix of the main cultural things**, sort of the English culture and the Māori culture and looking at the other cultures like the Scottish culture and the Pacific Island culture **that is all part of New Zealand... she did that well and the fact**

**that that she was from South Africa is like 'oh okay', but I think it perhaps would have had a stronger impact had it been a Māori tour operator or an English born, or a New Zealand born English speaking tour operator than South African. I mean she is identifying as New Zealander, that's great if she wants to adopt it here. But it was sort of I guess from our perspective.**

The 'Third Space' of cross-cultural dialogue has reached its peak of ambivalence. Who and what is New Zealand: 'English', 'Māori', 'Pacific Island', 'Scottish'? Whom does the tour host represent and whom is she 'identifying' with: 'New Zealand', 'South Africa'? Charlotte clearly appreciates the 'mix of the main cultural things...that is all part of New Zealand' within the broader spectrum of the nation. But she hesitates to accept a personalization of this 'mix' embodied in the South African host. Charlotte's 'suspicious hermeneutics' derives once again from the moral and political battle for self-representation: who is acting on behalf of whom? And who can differentiate and decide in this ubiquitous 'mix'?

Luckily, the tour host, the embodied space of a 'suspicious hermeneutics' and cross-cultural perplexity, offers a way out of this maze by reversing the order of negotiation to travel the cross-cultural journey from person to culture. Claudia from Canada puts it this way:

It was nice that our tour guide actually is Māori. **So she was able to give us a Māori welcome in Māori and give us probably some further insights** than, you know, somebody else would because **she grew up, her family, her parents, her history - she knows things first-hand.** So that was nice, we probably would have gotten a **different perspective from somebody else.**

At a first glance, Claudia seems to offer more evidence for the significance of self-representation to gain 'some further insights...first-hand' of the Other. However, she does not reduce the tour host to the sole function of cultural representation and embarks instead on a cross-cultural dialogue with a humanized Other, through 'her family', 'her parents' and 'her history'. In other words, the tour host is the person of departure to explore a culture. In the process, the abstract cultural category 'Māori' is transformed into *a face with a story*. Claudia confronts the 'other as a face, not mask' (Bauman, 1995: 59), which leaves a lasting impression as the follow-up interview indicates:

*And our tour guide was Māori as well. So I mean **she had a bit more insight that she could tell us, the things that I hadn't realized about what different symbols meant and why things were the way they were.***

Person and culture cannot, of course, ever be separated. Without culture we are, as Clifford Geertz (1973) puts it, 'unworkable monstrosities'. But persons and their undeniable individuality can claim their deserved position in the foreground without being reduced to the cultural dimension by 'branding human beings as types' which 'denies them their full humanity' (Abbott, 2002: 129). Michelle elaborates on her prior encounters with personalized cultures:

...we first experienced in Auckland, at the museum there. And **the most interesting part of that museum was talking to the performers who were the dancers and the singers. I just felt that that was a real highlight** because they were so gracious. They must have spent more than half an hour with us... **So when we can talk to, you know, a real person who was part of that culture, that was very significant to us, because they weren't performing they were just being themselves and being very straightforward and honest about all the things that were really significant in their lives.** And you don't get that kind of an opportunity very often...that was really quite memorable.

Michelle does not 'talk to' a culture, but to 'a real person who was part of that culture'. Cross-cultural dialogue moves beyond its merely abstract meaning and becomes a real *interpersonal dialogue among cultural human beings*. Michelle's story, albeit in a different museological context, epitomizes the essence of cross-cultural journeys disclosed in this research: *the humanization of culture*.



The evidence gathered in this research, which can only be hinted at here, suggests that *the humanization of culture and cross-cultural dialogue transforms a 'Third Space' into a pluralistic space* that pays tribute to the inescapable pluralism from within. Bhabha (1994) attempts to capture this 'difference within' through the term 'hybridity'. While this move successfully exposes 'cultural purity' as an 'oxymoron' (Appiah, 2006), it is still a vein of thought which sets out from the cultural. Instead, I postulate a *pluralistic space*, which evolves through the *face and story* of a cultural human being. In other words, the individual is the genesis of culture and not vice versa. Only by deconstructing cross-cultural dialogue as *interpersonal dialogue among cultural human beings* can the Other be freed from its abstract cage and opened for moral and political engagement.

### Cross-cultural hermeneutics: the shifting Self

It is interesting seeing it and being here through Australian eyes I think now instead of Kiwi eyes. (Julia, New Zealand born Australian)

After the empirical evidence established a pluralist space through the faces and stories of cultural human beings, it remains to interrogate the shared symbolic context or 'common sphere' (Dilthey, 1976) for the hermeneutic negotiation of differences and the facilitation of understandings. Andrew from Canada offers insights into the space's interpretive dynamics between Self and Other within the discursive museum space:

I think it was a significant part of the museum to me. I guess **I have the Canadian definition of the Māori house**, the greeting house, the house with all the hand-carved work around it. That was very, very impressive. I sort of equated it to the long house of the Iroquois in Canada. **So I make the comparison between the two indigenous cultures.**

As Andrew proceeds we see how his Canadian Self *shifts* from the Indigenous to the Scottish inclusion through the experience of the New Zealand Other within the wider context of 'travelling cultures':

We were also very interested however in the section about the Scottish settlers right now. **Again I can draw the connection because my family being from Scotland coming to Canada in the early 1800s. And stories were quite similar to what was recounted there...the similarities between the Scottish settlements in Canada and the Scottish settlements here is just amazing.** I think there are probably more Scots spread around the world than there are left in Scotland now... and it's something that people are trying to keep their heritage alive I guess. **And I just found it really interesting, the same things happen here that happen at home.**

Andrew carries on by *shifting* the cultural Self/Other encounter to a personal and professional level:

**I am a former politician so I am really interested in anything political. And gatherings of people from different places with tribal structures are a very political meeting.** So I just found that fascinating and the fact that it's still used for greeting visitors and used for important ceremonies, like the tour guide had mentioned funerals and weddings had been held there, and **that's very sentimental and meant a lot just to see that.**

While describing his experience of a traditional *marae* (or Māori ceremonial space) he now *shifts* his Self back to the cultural and includes the Aboriginal Other within the Canadian 'we':

And I guess **I am fairly interested in our own Aboriginal culture at home.** And **we, the Aboriginals in Canada** would carve in cedar and we've got very few examples that have survived as well as that one.

The sense of the Canadian 'we' is realigned through contrasting himself with the Aboriginal Other within the Canadian Self. This happens again through the experience of the New Zealand Other, which leads to a cosmopolitan conclusion:

**I noticed you have a similar problem here that we have at home**, and that's the number of Aboriginal land claims. A lot of Aboriginals here are claiming they were taken advantage of during the Treaty process and we have still got legal challenges going on. And I am not sure if the tour guide carries a prejudice into it, I don't know, but it would have appeared to me from his explanations to us is that New Zealand is somewhat ahead of Canada in resolving these issues. **And I just found it very interesting to know there was a similar concern going on in both parts of the world.**

Andrew's cross-cultural journey is characterized not only by the opening towards the Other but also by a *shifting sense of Self*. The 'cosmopolitanized' condition of our time forces and enables Julia 'seeing it and being here through Australian eyes...instead of Kiwi eyes'. It causes Michelle to identify as *both Armenian and American* and leads to Andrew's 'multiple loyalties' (Beck, 2006), *the shifting Self* which corresponds to an endemic relativity of otherness.

In the process, the contemporaneous presence of commonalities and differences creates a shared 'cosmopolitanized' terrain which represents the 'common sphere' needed to transform cross-cultural dialogue into potential understandings. Most importantly, such a vein of thought converts the 'neither/nor' predicament of a 'hybrid Third Space' (Bhabha, 1994) into a 'both/and' outlook of what I term a *pluralist cosmopolitan space*. The former simultaneously contests and perpetuates the either/or logic of binary oppositions while the latter builds a shared framework for multiple identifications.

## Conclusion

This paper addressed a gap in the museum literature by *humanizing* the museum as 'contact zone' through interpretive actions, movements and performances made by museum visitors, or cultural actors, and refining the concept and its implications for museum theory and practice through an in-depth and long-term understanding of their *experience* in museums. The research material exposed the entry of the emotive trajectory into the realm of culture, manifesting itself as an 'inclusive feel' in the case of Julia. The first stage of the cross-cultural voyage constructed *bicultural meanings* and originated in the 'reader's world', their own interpretive environment framing the experience of other cultural worlds. In Bruce's case, the foundation of his interpretive community not only affected but prevented the engagement with the cultural 'Other' culminating in the 'feel of imperialism' of an 'outsider'.

The narrative journey *from bicultural meanings to cross-cultural dialogue* enabled the interviewees to leave the 'reader's world' behind. Different interpretive avenues such as *self-representation*, *the reframing of understandings* and *the intervention of the tour* translated a 'contact zone' of physical encounter into a dialogical 'Third Space'. The tour host's mediation through the self-representation from an 'emic perspective' (Mieri, 2010) helped Bruce to engage with a foreign cultural universe after his initial reluctance. The empirical evidence highlighted that the *humanization of culture and Other* deconstructed cross-cultural dialogue as *interpersonal dialogue among cultural human beings* as basis for the political and moral engagement with a humanized Other.

The respondents' interpretive voyage led to a *cross-cultural hermeneutics* embodied by Julia's comment that 'it is interesting seeing it and being here through Australian eyes...now instead of Kiwi eyes'. The research findings supported my argument that cross-cultural dialogue was processed not only through the opening towards the Other but through the interpretive ontological endeavour of what I termed the *shifting Self*. Importantly, the associated multiple identifications emphasized the relativity of otherness and shaped what I called a *pluralist cosmopolitan space*. This discursive terrain represents the 'common sphere' that potentially transforms cross-cultural translation and dialogue into understandings. Its frame of reference is characterized by the simultaneous presence of a 'cosmopolitanized' horizon and the humanization of culture through 'stories' and 'faces'.

These theoretical propositions gained through empirical examinations compensate for a deficiency in Clifford's notion of 'contact zones'. Although Clifford (1988, 1997) refers to contemporary and historical cosmopolitan experiences, his unconditional defence of cultural relativism and scepticism towards 'cosmopolitan essences' and 'universal values' fails to provide 'contact zones' with a shared symbolic terrain which can convert translations into understandings. In contrast, Anthony Appiah (2006) instead points out that one of the greatest achievements of anthropology itself is the awareness that we can make sense of each other. Given the 'cosmopolitanized' world of the twenty first century, 'contact zones' are inevitably embedded in such contexts. This is not to be misunderstood as some artificial 'cosmopolitan essence' or 'universal value', but should be seen as a common framework in which the 'inescapable hermeneutic complexity in moral and political affairs' (Held, 2008) can be contested.

Scholars of museum studies have pondered 'third spaces' (Bodo, 2008), 'the cosmopolitan museum' (Kreuzzieger, 2008), 'integrated diversity' (Sandell, 2007) and the 'shift from discourse about others to discourse about othering' (Pieterse, 1997: 141). All these perspectives represent important pieces of the overall puzzle of a *pluralist cosmopolitan space* which shapes and strengthens our 'inner mobility' (Beck, 1997) to meet the daily challenges of a life 'in-between' differing, overlapping and contradictory worlds. In my opinion, museums are unique places to unearth and stimulate the 'moments or processes...in the articulation of cultural differences' (Bhabha, 1994: 1) sabotaging the reductionist trap of binary oppositions and melting the iron grid of an 'ethnic structuralism' (Williams, 2003). The *pluralist cosmopolitan space* that emerges from the research material offers a discursive remedy for the pain of chronic 'underreading' in cultural characterizations and even erodes the 'untranslatable' (Bhabha, 1994), leading to 'higher forms of understanding' without being trapped in the reformist projects of tolerance and diversity.

I also argue that visitor-centred research approaches, as demonstrated here, can help to foster the dialogue between museum theory and practice. Although Te Papa defines itself as a bicultural museum, the empirical evidence has clearly highlighted the 'cosmopolitanized' nature of the museum experience. Even though all informants are linked to national *places*, they inescapably become part of the discursive dynamics of a *pluralist cosmopolitan space*. Consequently, I spoke of 'global visitors' in this paper. These discursive dynamics should flow into the conceptual design of exhibitions and programmes creating a cross-cultural museum practice which places humanized cultural perspectives in a global context. As we have seen in the case of *taonga*, this requires in-depth contextualization through 'thick translation' (Appiah, 2000) to cultivate a cross-cultural landscape for intercultural literacy instead of ethnocentric misreadings. This research's findings should also be used in conjunction with narrative and interpretive theory to transform narrative museological representations into a 'polysemic exhibition practice' (Witcomb, 2003) within a 'reflexive museum' (Schorch, 2009). A theoretically and philosophically informed museum practice is as much needed as an empirically grounded museum theory.

Received: 4 August 2012

Finally Accepted: 5 March 2013

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