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Exhibiting Controversy at Melbourne’s Immigration Museum

Contentious topics such as difficult histories, taboo topics and hot contemporary issues of local and global relevance and significance are difficult to represent because they are unpredictable, involve conflict, are mobile and are inseparable from a range of broader social and political contexts and flows, many of whom cannot be calculated and anticipated. Most importantly, they embody a divisive dimension, raising alternative answers while challenging an individual’s or group’s values, beliefs, ideologies or moral position.¹

Despite the challenges raised by Fiona Cameron of the fluid, unpredictable, and potentially divisive nature of tackling contentious historical and contemporary themes and issues, there are museums in Australia and overseas accepting this challenge. Museums are uniquely placed to construct and present histories and engage in contemporary social and political issues within the public realm in ways in which few other cultural agencies and producers can. The outputs of universities tend to have specific and narrow audiences; published public histories and film history documentaries and recreations can utilise only singular interpretive communication devices; audience-interactive television debate forums such as Q&A on the ABC or reality issue-driven television series such as ‘Go Back to Where You Came From’ on SBS are now expanding their audience engagement through live video and twitter feeds and interactive websites.

Contemporary innovative museums have access to all these communication devices and more. Museum curators can utilise simultaneously the written word, cultural artefacts, still and moving images, sound, ambient physical spaces, interactive screens, immersive experiences, and recreated set pieces. Museums can draw upon artists, designers, film makers, writers, and actors to contribute to the ways in which content is delivered. Most importantly, they can

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facilitate the participation of diverse individuals, families, and communities to tell their own stories, interpret their own identities and reflect on their own place in the past and present through a formal presence within exhibition narratives, as well as informally through ongoing in-gallery, offsite and online engagement.

These opportunities are exciting and empowering for museums prepared to present histories and contemporary issues of a potentially challenging and even confrontational nature. Museums can provide points of historical reference and context which demonstrate the relevance of the past in our personal and collective identity formation in the present—thus reframing historical narratives within contemporary contexts. These approaches to museum content require a long term commitment, usually necessitating organisational change. They demand a willingness to take the risks, withstand the criticism and also reap the rewards of true engagement with communities and with issues of relevance, meaning and genuine societal impact. The Immigration Museum in Melbourne is attempting to be one such museum. This short article will examine the evolution of the Immigration Museum’s permanent exhibitions as a microcosm of shifts in museological practices of historical interpretation, community engagement, and audience learnings—an evolution which has taken the museum from presenting historical migration narratives to negotiating issues such as identity, racism, difference and social cohesion. It will posit that museums can be sites of controversy and debate, and participate in, contribute to and even lead genuine social attitudinal and behavioural change.
Background: Immigration Museum
The Immigration Museum opened in 1998 in Melbourne as a venue of Museum Victoria. Its longstanding charter has been to explore the histories of migration to Victoria from the early nineteenth century, to be broadly representative, to demonstrate that we all have a migration ancestry unless we are Indigenous to this country, to represent the impact of migration on Aboriginal peoples, to celebrate and promote our cultural diversity in all its forms, and to do all this through a variety of collections, exhibitions, education and public programs and activities. Long term exhibitions have evolved, rotated and completely changed over the years to reflect cultural diversity, showcase growing collections, respond to visitor and educational demands and, more recently, engage more strongly in contemporary political and social issues and debates. This article will consider the evolution of the content, intent and external push factors of these museum-generated ‘permanent’ exhibitions.

Having worked as the curator of migration since the Immigration Museum’s inception I feel uniquely placed to reflect on how history has been presented in our exhibitions, how we have utilised many techniques to engage diverse audiences, and how we have shifted into a more overtly political environment where we are willing not just to present histories and stories but challenge and provoke responses and change within a contemporary landscape charged with emotion and dissent.

From Migration Histories to Identity Politics

Museums are now sites in which knowledge, memory and history are examined, rather than places where cultural authority is asserted.¹

Museums which genuinely desire to be relevant and responsive to changing visitor demands, changing social, political and cultural environments and changing museological communication techniques must, resources permitting, evolve also. Nearly all the long term exhibitions at the Immigration Museum have either had partial or

¹ Lynda Kelly and Angelina Russo, ‘From Communities of Practice to Value Networks: Engaging Museums in Web 2.0’, in ibid, 284.
complete redevelopment over the last 14 years. The *Leavings* gallery (1998, updated 2007) includes a powerful audio visual presentation which presents global motivations for migration, crossing time, country and culture. The *Immigrant Stories* gallery (1998, annual updates) shifts into a more personal and individual perspective, featuring a series of rotating, often object-rich stories of immigrants to Victoria which represent different periods, countries, cultures, genders and motivations for migrating. This exhibition also includes a visual timeline around the perimeter wall which provides visitors with a decade by decade snapshot of key events and moments in Victoria’s immigration history, including its impact upon Aboriginal peoples. The *Journeys* gallery (1998, updated 2012) housed in the monumental Long Room architectural space focuses upon the migrant journey experience via a series of recreated ship environments through which visitors can get a sense of ship travel at different points in time. It concludes with a large, recently installed multimedia interactive inviting visitors to select from six ship and aeroplane journeys across time (including a contemporary asylum seeker boat from Indonesia) to trace the route, distance and nature of the different voyages. This space also includes *Origins* (1998, updated 2009), a computer interactive through which visitors can obtain census data, and information about the migration and settlement of over 70 Victorian community groups. The *Getting In* exhibition (2003–) focuses on the policies and processes of Australian immigration both within an historical and contemporary framework and the content is presented through objects, images, text, and interactives. Finally, *Identity: yours mine, ours* (2011–), the most recent addition to the Museum’s suite of permanent exhibitions, focuses on how our cultural heritage, languages, beliefs, and family connections influence our self-perceptions and our perceptions of other people – perceptions that can lead to discovery, confusion, prejudice and understanding. It employs multiple interpretive devices.
to engage visitors and is a conceptual rather than historical, narrative or chronological exhibition, although it includes elements of all three.

Clearly there are many challenges in presenting histories and contemporary issues relating to migration, settlement, diversity, difference, race and racism, multiculturalism, and individual and collective identity; not least of which is meeting and extending the expectations and needs of diverse audiences, including over 40,000 school students annually. Immigration and identity are subjects which are defined in a myriad of different ways, and which provoke varied emotional, contended, collective and individual responses. Immigration is both historical and current, and infinitely relevant to Australia’s social, cultural, political and economic landscape – and has been since 1788. It is by its very nature challenging and potentially controversial because it involves such concepts as national and cultural identity, racism, multiculturalism, globalisation and policies of selection.

In order to grapple with these complexities there has been a clear evolution of the exhibition content at the Immigration Museum and the ways in which it is delivered which has tended to build and cumulate rather than be replaced. For example the telling of personal stories is fundamental to the inclusion of diverse voices and experiences as well as encouraging empathetic visitor responses. However, these stories demand political and social context, resulting in an exhibition about the evolution of Australia’s immigration policy, thus contextualising the white privilege, discrimination and even refugee policies that resonate today. Indeed *Getting In* was a response to the need identified by both staff and many visitors for the presentation of the grittier side to Australia’s immigration history and an engagement with contemporary issues. It
does so through factual information, for example exposing the misuse of the term ‘illegals’, the reality of Australia as a signatory to the UN Convention, and a redefinition of who the majority of ‘illegals’ actually are (visa overstayers who have arrived by plane). The exhibition includes a poignant letter from a deportee to his lawyer, and overall, dispassionately walks visitors through Australia’s undeniably white Australia policy past. Getting In also includes two of the Museum’s most successful interactives, one extremely simple and one more complex.

The Dictation Test interactive demonstrates the simple power in enabling visitors to ‘do’ rather than just read. It provides an immediacy that places people in the shoes of thousands of applicants who through a policy of discrimination were barred entry because they could not pass what visitors realise could be an impossible and unfair test. This works because they can undertake it themselves through an audio narration of real sample tests from the 1930s, with language (in English) so convoluted that native English-speaking visitors admit to failure. The Interview interactive takes a different approach, by inserting visitors, not into the role of immigration applicant, but the interviewer. They engage with real, life-scale people (scripted actors) on screen and learn about immigration policy over three time periods through the effective marrying of learning devices: immersion, participation, listening and reading. Interviews are couched in the language and policy of the day, and policy fact files provide references for informing selection decisions. History is brought into the present by demonstrating migrant application processes as a continuum involving real people affected by political, social and economic factors; people who can be hidden by dry bureaucratic case files, media representations, and political agendas; but also people who must move through necessary, often difficult and complicated selection processes.

A recent example of how the past is always writ large upon the present is the controversy caused by an object on display in the Getting In exhibition, given a much wider audience through its inclusion on the Museum’s Collections Online website. In 2012 a

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2 Museum Victoria Collections Online website
public commentary thread sparked in response to the object as presented online has been a fascinating case study of the role of museums in representing the past in all its light and shade; the power of material culture in enabling that representation; and the heat in the current debate about identity, refugees, and national security which the responses to the object have revealed. The ‘White Australia’ song sheet music (1910)\(^3\) has provided a point of intersection between the past and present whereby the public are using it as a way to contest both Australia’s historical and contemporary approaches to immigration and nation-building, but also the Museum’s responsibility or complicity (depending on the person’s point of view) in collecting, displaying and interpreting certain artefacts. It is interesting that the object on display has not provoked such critique – perhaps because of the clear contextualisation of it in the exhibition, as well as the nature of visitors who come to an Immigration Museum. But once museums put themselves out online, the visitation is boundless, and so are attitudes to what is the role of museums in historical representation. As Fiona Cameron has observed:

> Interactions with museum information and heritage collections, some planned, others serendipitous are now being conducted through these multiple and extended connections of people, ideas and objects, across long distances and national boundaries. Museum information is fluid, boundaries no longer exist, enabling all these things to be used and reconfigured within flows.\(^4\)

With the advent of the *Identity: yours, mine, ours* exhibition,\(^5\) the Immigration Museum has taken its next step in its evolution, reframing itself firmly not just as a content provider, or a facilitator of multiple voices, but as an agent for change within a contemporary society. It attempts to interrogate what we mean by identity, and the personal, collective, national, political landscapes in which identities – be they articulated as ethnicity, faith, gender, sexuality, class, geography and all the convergent combinations – have and continue

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to operate. Engaging with these highly sophisticated concerns has been the essential next step in the evolution of the Immigration Museum and its audiences (with many more steps yet to come) as it just touches the sensitive surface of identity hybridity, citizenship, racism and cultural relativity in contemporary Australia.

**Interpretive Devices**
Museums are simultaneously constrained and liberated by their contexts, methodologies and audiences. Their interpretations of history are highly visible, their audiences diverse, with a particular emphasis on school curricula relevance. As such exhibition themes must be broadly relevant and attract visitation, text accessible and concise. Museum budgets are finite but visitor demand for change and innovation is unceasing, requiring museums to engage with new technologies within the ever-increasingly competitive entertainment and education landscape in which they operate. Nevertheless, museums can lift history off the printed page and present it in exciting and innovative ways, playing with layers of information through objects, images, multimedia, ambient spaces, immersive environments, sound and light. Museums can engage diverse artistic practitioners to contribute to our interpretation of the past and present – artists, writers, sound designers, performers and filmmakers – as well as provide spaces for people to give voice to their own stories. Museums in many ways have more in common with television, theatre and film historical dramatisations than with academic historical practice. Curators work in public history, we tell stories, we make the past accessible and more and more we grapple with contemporary issues informed by that past which places museums as potentially not just sites of historical learnings but sites of political and social debate. As Caleb Williams observes,

> the museum becomes a deeper, braver, more empowering and philosophically useful space to audiences when it both engages with, and profoundly interprets, the often bafflingly complex cultural, socio-political and behavioural reality that surrounds it, privileging both past and present as legitimate targets of museological investigation.6

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Since the 1980s, many museums have shifted from presenting purely linear chronological narratives of social, cultural, artistic, political ‘progress’ to a rediscovery of ‘hidden’ histories through the cementing of social history as an academic and museological discipline which also embraced oral history as a methodology. History became storytelling about and by ordinary people. This approach still drives much museum presentation of histories albeit through ever more sophisticated technologies. Museums can include the voices of people through listening devices, enable visitors to engage though video presentations, using touchscreens to select stories of interest. These techniques generally augment objects, text and imagery. But what is now underway in museums is what Andrea Witcomb calls the rise of ‘affect’ in our museum experiences. She argues that museums can find ways in which the audience is also brought into the dialogue. Of central importance here is the use of affect as an interpretive strategy. Affect works through evoking, moving, or touching the viewer, producing a visceral response that promotes empathy rather than simply sympathy. Feeling empathy is a prerequisite for dialogue, for the recognition of commonalities. While sympathy can reinforce differences by operating in terms of power relations, empathy can build bridges.7

Through multimedia installations, immersive theatre experiences, interaction between in-gallery and online content, visitors are invited to engage with historical and contemporary issues and themes through ‘feeling it’, through empathetic experiences, through emotion as well as intellect. This interpretive strategy steps beyond listening to the reflections of someone about their past, beyond immersive set environments (such as the Ship at the Immigration Museum); it is about pushing the visitor to grapple with who they are and what they think and feel, as much as learning often at a safe distance about others, whether they be historical or contemporary people and stories. The strength of the Immigration Museum, which has taken many years of evolution, self-critique and investment in change, is that it is embracing multiple layers of interpretation which have accumulated

to offer deep experiences with which visitors can choose to interact, absorb, challenge and even reject.

‘Affecting’ Museum Experiences

To identify with people from the past or from other places empathetically through the sense is clearly a different way of engaging them than abstractly through the reading of written words. Instead of our minds making intellectual contact with their minds, our senses make affective contact with their sensory experience.  

The Immigration Museum’s *Identity* exhibition provides a useful starting point for considering how museum exhibitions can present histories, tell stories, and debate contemporary issues, through such ‘affecting’ visitor experiences. Through the paradigm of belonging and not belonging, the *Identity* exhibition aims to champion cultural diversity in all its complexity, challenge racist attitudes, and promote positive social change. A topic of currency, *Identity* lent itself to a contemporary emphasis while still allowing room for historical narratives, and it enabled the Immigration Museum to engage in the dialogue around what is meant by difference and diversity, belonging and not belonging, individuality and collectivity. Identity is conceptual, deeply personal, subjective, organic, and multiple. As the subject for an exhibition, it is neither finite, nor exhaustive; thus the exhibition has no one single voice, it asks lots of questions and certainly does not provide all the answers. It is hoped that visitors find something that moves, inspires, or challenges them, makes them curious, surprised, amused, or angry – and preferably more than one of these responses.

The *Identity* exhibition includes conventional ways to deliver content. Objects give materiality to tangible manifestations of both personal and collective identities as well as cultural stereotyping, ranging from a hijab in football colours to a contemporary gollywog. A chronological history of race-based science, politics and social engineering is provided through a graphic timeline. These elements are augmented by the interpretive devices of ‘affect’ in a number of

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subtle and overt ways, reflecting what Olivia Guntarik describes as ‘a pedagogy and practice which are evermore focused on the experiential, sensory and interactive dimensions of the spatial.’ At one end of the scale, the Identity exhibition employs text labels which constantly ask questions of the visitor, and invite self-reflection:

> We pride ourselves on our generosity and the diversity of our society. But how do we feel when difference moves in next door? Or sits next to us on the train or in the classroom?  

At the other end are key interactive experiences which immerse and challenge visitors in different ways.

The ‘Welcome’ experience perhaps more than any other in the exhibition takes as its communication device an immersive theatre installation which confronts visitors to engage through their feelings informed by their own experiences and self-identification. Developed in collaboration with Sydney-based multimedia artist Lynette Wallworth, this work aims to challenge visitors to consider how it feels to be accepted, connected, different and rejected. It is the exhibition’s entry experience and immerses visitors early in these concepts and hopefully unsettles them. Of her own philosophy for the work Wallworth states,

> You can’t know what another person is thinking or thinks of you until you ask them. So much [of the way we think and behave] is subconscious; we're oblivious to the way we train our thinking according to what we ingest from the media and other people. The only antidote to that is personal connection.

A large rear projection of life-sized people draws visitors down a darkened corridor in order to interact with the virtual but lifelike people who represent diversity in its myriad cultural, gender, age, interest group and faith forms. The continuous film loop has the

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people (all voluntary participants) alternately welcome with warm positive body language, or reject with uneasy, scornful, suspicious responses. Such exhibition content, argues Witcomb,

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\text{work[s] by producing feelings, senses and innate cultural memories, not by lecturing. ..the meanings require work, imaginative play and physical interaction on the part of visitors...their narrative is only produced in the active engagement of the visitor in the space itself.}^{12}
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In order to engage with the Museum’s diverse audiences, the power of such installations is also that it is not the exhibition’s sole interpretive device. In order to provoke intellectual as well as emotional responses, the exhibition requires a range of techniques which taken in its entirety, offer visitors many ways of engaging with what is often challenging content.

**Ongoing Challenges**

As privileged sites for the representation of collective identities and the construction of notions of belonging, museums can capture the transformations affecting cultural identities in contemporary multicultural societies…Increasingly called to take an active role in fostering social inclusion and promoting intercultural dialogue, museums have turned into elected sites for the practice of multiculturalism.\(^{13}\)

Critical to this transformative role suggested by Marzia Varutti is the museum’s engagement with diverse individuals, communities and identities in order to enable self-representation, while attempting to foster broader messages about social cohesion and citizen responsibilities. There has been a degree of market re-positioning of the Immigration Museum in this process, by tackling contemporary edgy subject matter, deploying new technologies to deliver it and targeting young people as a new audience to engage with it. The objective has been to place the museum within the landscape of currency, relevance and modernity, associating it with a willingness to be daring and controversial so that as Caleb Williams observes, ‘the museum re-defines, re-images and to some extent, reinvents itself as a


\(^{13}\) Marzia Varutti, 'Indexes of Exclusion', in Guntarik, 319.
viable, contemporary social technology, newly visible to new audiences.\textsuperscript{14}

This is not, however, a glib or cynical grab for audience share. The Immigration Museum, while certainly aiming for new audiences and relevance, is completely sincere in its desire to engage with the key issues of relevance to its purpose – diversity, difference, racism and discrimination – and indeed assumes a leading role in the debate about these issues across academic, education, health, government and creative sectors. This leadership is demonstrated as much by the ongoing activities that surround the \textit{Identity} exhibition as much as the exhibition itself – a recent cross-sector symposium organised and hosted by the Immigration Museum on tackling racism (2012),\textsuperscript{15} the exhibition website \textsuperscript{16} making most of the content universally accessible; and an Australian Research Council research project which will determine how museum programs can reduce racism and increase acceptance of diversity among high school students and their teachers by measuring in Victorian classrooms the genuine impact of the \textit{Identity} exhibition on school students long after the actual visit.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{quote}
The museum...has the potential to function as a ‘frontier’: a zone where learning is created, new identities are forged; new connections are made between disparate groups and their own histories...[and] help disadvantaged groups, to raise self-esteem and even to challenge racism by progressive learning.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

This is now possible because museums can offer different forms of learning and through appealing to mind, heart and soul, exhibitions can enable visitors to interact with ideas, information, stories, imagery, sounds, voices, and spaces that create opportunities for encounters with their own selves and with others. This ‘frontier’ space

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Williams, ‘The Transformations of the Museum’, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{15} ‘Racism: can we talk’, two day symposium, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 23-24 August, 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{16} http://museumvictoria.com.au/identity
\item \textsuperscript{17} Australian Research Council funded project (underway): ‘Using museums to counter racism and increase acceptance of diversity among young people’, Deakin University, University of Melbourne, Museum Victoria and Victorian Health Foundation, 2012-15.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Viv Golding, \textit{Learning at the Museum Frontiers: Identity, Race and Power} (Farnham Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009), 4.
\end{itemize}
is not just physical but also alludes to ‘spatial practices’ where visitors learn through safe, creative and empowering interactions with other people and ideas.¹⁹

After 14 years of representing Victoria’s migration histories, stories and contemporary issues, the Immigration Museum has consciously and purposefully inserted itself more firmly into community conversations about diversity, inclusivity, prejudice, and racism. Alarming statistics on the status of racism such as those published by The Challenging Racism Project²⁰ in 2011 have only highlighted the need for ‘socially activist’²¹ museums to tackle these issues. The Immigration Museum’s challenge throughout its permanent exhibitions has been to strike a balance between assuming an ideological perspective with educational outcomes, and presenting content in a way that demonstrates a multiplicity of perspectives. In this way, it is hoped that visitors can respond in their own many and varied ways to the historical and contemporary representations they encounter. This challenge culminated during the development of the Identity exhibition with its mix of historical and contemporary content, interrogative approach, multiple voices and ‘affective’ visitor experiences. In reference to the ‘hot-topic’ exhibition, Caleb Williams argues that it

"... inevitably asks as many questions as it answers... they possess the ability to speak to both our heads and hearts; deepening thought around important issues so that visitors are offered the opportunity to leave the space of the exhibition with expanded perspectives, changed minds and opened eyes."²²

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¹⁹ Ibid., 56.
²⁰ K. Dunn et al., Challenging Racism: the Anti-Racism Research Project National Level Findings (University of Sydney, 2011), http://www.uws.edu.au/social_sciences/soss/research/challenging_racism. The Project surveyed more than 12,500 people nation-wide and found that 12% of Australians agree that they are personally prejudiced against other cultures, and 84% believe there is racial prejudice in Australia. About 1/6 of Australians experience racism in their everyday lives.
If this is a measure of success for an exhibition of controversy, then, according to at least one visitor, the *Identity* exhibition has perhaps made a lasting impact:

I didn’t expect it to move me as it did, it was both a powerful and insightful experience on a number of levels. Few exhibitions are able to dig deep and ask questions that we all need to ask ourselves as citizens of this land.\(^{23}\)

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