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TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF FEELING

Understanding How Museums
Create a Space for Cross-
Cultural Encounters

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If much of the new museology that developed in the 1990s could be described as informed by a politics of identity which stressed the importance of developing museological practices and their theorization in ways that were attentive to issues of representation and access (Lumley 1988; Vergo 1989; Karp and Lavine 1991; Ames 1992; Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine 1992), the development of what Sharon Macdonald (2006) calls the “second wave” of museum studies in the 2000s moved toward including another set of concerns.¹ As well as valuing a connection with the world of practice, these concerns had to do with allowing a space for the analysis of the poetics as well as the politics of museum work. A considerable proportion of our critical gaze on museum practices has become focused on the ways in which exhibitions are increasingly concerned with reinventing the relationship between visitors and the subjects of the narratives the museum is representing rather than with continuing to identify the ways in which they replay hegemonic discourses and representations. Much of this reflects a revisionist agenda on the part of museums themselves, aimed at producing a museological practice that intervenes in current social and political debates in ways that go beyond a simplistic celebration and reinforcement of existing identities. In the process, traditional power relations between subject and object are being questioned. Much of this practice and its accompanying discussion, occur around museums of anthropology as they seek to engage with and overcome the legacy of colonialism (Clifford 1997; Kreps 2003; Peers and Brown 2003; Phillips 2003; Shelton 2006), but some of it also engages with history museums, particularly around relations

between museums and communities and engagements with “difficult histories” (Simon 2006; Bonnell and Simon 2007; Macdonald and Basu 2007; Macdonald 2009; Witcomb 2010b; 2013a; 2013b).

Central to this scholarly work are two connected issues. One is to understand what the contemporary role of museums is in the formation of citizens, given, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002) has argued, that the politics of identity has given rise to more performative understandings of citizenship in which questions concerning affect, memory, and sensory forms of knowledge production are paramount. The second related issue, following the turn in contemporary humanities to understanding the role of the senses in human experience, is a concern with understanding how museums work at an affective level (Chapter 3 by Sandra H. Dudley and Chapter 4 by Janice Baker in this volume; Gregory and Witcomb 2007; Macdonald and Basu 2007; Dudley 2010; Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2011; Witcomb 2013a; 2013b), including how affect can be used as a tool to promote the sociopolitical work that many museums now understand themselves to be engaged in – the building of a social consciousness within society that encourages an ethics of care between people regardless of class, gender, and religious and ethnic differences (Bonnell and Simon 2007; Janes 2009; Silverman 2010; Marstine 2011).

This chapter aims to make a contribution to these discussions by both analyzing and theorizing new forms of exhibition practices that contribute to this work by using what I am calling “a pedagogy of feeling.” This is a phrase I have coined to describe the ways in which some forms of contemporary exhibition practices stage affective encounters between viewer and viewed through the ways in which they use a range of devices to promote sensorial experiences that encourage introspective reflection on the part of visitors. There are a number of authors who are beginning to conduct a critical analysis of the ways in which museums are creating spaces for introspective reflections (e.g., Beier-de Haan 2006; Simon 2006; Bal 2007). Two of these, Bal and Simon, have been particularly influential on my thinking. Coming from both a critical and a literary theory background, Bal argues in her discussion of *Partners*, a Canadian exhibition curated by Ydessa Hendeles at the Haus der Kunst in Munich which looked at the long repressed history of relations between Jewish and German peoples, that the politics of this exhibition is intricately connected to its aesthetic strategies. The latter, she argues, are what enable an “affective relationship, not only between the art and the viewer but also between the artworks themselves” (Bal 2007, 72). These relations, for Bal, produce an exhibition syntax that promotes “a perception that troubles us” leading to an “action we hesitate about” (72). In creating an affective space that encourages critical reflection, such practices enable the questioning of received collective memories in ways that produce new relationships between past and present.

In its attention to the significance of aesthetic strategies in developing a poetics that embody the political aims of the exhibition, Bal’s arguments, like mine below,

also share a commonality with Roger Simon's (2006) description of Adorno's philosophy of aesthetics. Simon points to two ideas that, for Adorno, link the conceptual and the aconceptual, or, in our terminology, the rational and the affective. The first is the idea of "parataxis" as an essential ingredient of the poetic form. Parataxis, according to Simon (2006, 200), refers to the "placing of propositions or clauses side by side, without indicating with conjunctions or connecting words, the relation (or coordination or subordination) between them." When applied to exhibitions, this idea refers to the power of juxtaposition to create meaning in the gaps between things, and particularly to the idea that these gaps work through poetic or affective realms rather than explicit rational forms of knowledge production. The visitor is not told in words what this meaning is, but is encouraged to feel it. The second idea that Simon draws from Adorno's philosophy is that there is no necessary hierarchy to these juxtapositions. The particular is not necessarily an instance of a universal. In the context of exhibitions, this means, Simon argues, that particular documents and objects are not made to speak for a larger narrative but are allowed to create new meanings by their juxtaposition with other objects, documents, stories, and installations. The visitor creates meanings by working the spaces between the juxtapositions, both within individual stories and across stories within the exhibition as a whole.

In this chapter I use these ideas to build an argument for the need to understand these strategies as part of a wider development within curatorial practices that goes to the heart of what we understand a museum to be or, at the very least, what it might be becoming. For the opportunity these strategies create for introspective reflections are an essential ingredient to the ways in which contemporary forms of citizenship, in which museums are deeply implicated, are understood as embodying both a performative element and an understanding that the practice of citizenship increasingly involves political activity in the public sphere on the part of citizens (Chapter 7 by Joke Hermes and Peter Dahlgren in this volume; Dahlgren 2009). I am particularly interested in the ways these strategies play a structural role in supporting the political ambitions of those exhibitions aimed at promoting cross-cultural forms of understanding in contexts where difficult histories make positive and empowering relations between groups hard to achieve.

Genealogy

While the phrase "a pedagogy of feeling" might recall Raymond Williams's (1961) concept of a "structure of feeling," particularly the tension between the ways in which feelings can structure our lived experiences while remaining intangible in their manifestation, the immediate context for my ideas actually comes from Tony Bennett's (1995) use of the term "a pedagogy of walking" to describe the strategies used by museums in the nineteenth century to achieve their particular pedagogical

responsibility to contribute to the formation of citizens then being shaped to serve the needs of newly emerging nation-states at the center of empires. In using this term to describe these strategies, Bennett wanted to get at the ways in which visitors embodied within their person their new status as citizens by walking along a linear display designed to support the evolutionary principles of the day.

These linear displays worked to produce the white male visitor as the pinnacle of the evolutionary ladder by generating a gaze that put a distance between viewer and viewed. Those on display were the other or the antithesis of the citizen of the modern nation-state. While the development of disciplines such as history, geography, archaeology, and geology within an evolutionary framework was important to this development, so too was the curatorial belief that “seeing” evolution in a linear sequence of material objects would at once prove and communicate it.

The importance of vision to this pedagogy is clearer in Bennett’s expansion of his argument in *Pasts beyond Memory* (1998), where he explains how this pedagogy of serial walking relied on the notion that looking at a series of visual sequences would automatically communicate the principles of evolution. As he puts it, museums acted on “the belief that no effort should be spared to lay out objects within the museum space in ways that would make the relation between them – relations of temporal succession and development – readily and directly perceptible” (Bennett 1998, 161). As he goes on to argue, there were of course considerable practical problems with this idea, problems that led to the need to develop forms of interpretation that addressed the gap between things such as labels. Rather than evidence, then, objects became illustrations in what continued to be a text-based system of knowledge production in which the senses played little part. Vision was more useful for reading than for apprehending the state of the world directly by looking at material culture.

Vision, then, was understood in rational terms, which is somewhat different from current understandings of vision as part of a sensorial landscape capable of drawing out affective responses. As Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips (2011, 7) explain, understanding vision as integral to the domain of rational knowledge and as separate from the domain of sensorial experiences was, in itself, integral to colonial perspectives in which the senses were associated with the other. Paying attention to how museums are using the senses in contemporary forms of exhibition-making, then, is also to explore the ways in which they are challenging the legacies of not doing so in the past. Bennett (2006, 277–278) himself opens up this space when he picks up on Barry’s (2001, 135) arguments that the increasing importance of interactivity in museums, based on a fuller use of sensorial experiences, reflects a model of citizenship in which the citizen is encouraged to be less “reliant on the authoritative guidance of others” and is, instead, encouraged to be “responsible for their own governance.” For Bennett, these differences are to be understood as part of the movement to pluralize museum representations in ways that no longer privilege a singular perspective. They do not, however, challenge the primacy of the visual as the dominant strategy within which museums fulfill their civic

responsibilities (Bennett 2006, 279). I, however, want to posit the possibility that the privileging of visual regimes is beginning to be challenged and that in the process we are witnessing a change in the way museums understand their role from one based on the need to represent a plurality of perspectives to one based on the need to also build bridges across those pluralities. In doing so, I argue that a pedagogy of feeling involves a new set of relations between self and other in ways that go beyond questions of access and representation and in which vision is no longer separated from the other senses and is in fact reliant on them to fulfill its full function.

In developing this argument, then, I am concerned not only with identifying the exhibition techniques that support this pedagogy of feeling, but also with understanding the uses to which such techniques are being put, particularly in contexts where the legacies of former imperial and colonial regimes are still keenly felt. In doing so, I am concerned with bringing these into our understanding of the cultural work undertaken by contemporary exhibition-making discussions currently occurring in a number of fields – such as citizenship studies, affect studies, memory studies, and public history. I do so with reference to one particular exhibition, which will serve as an exemplar of the kinds of exhibitions I am interested in bringing under this term “a pedagogy of feeling,” *First Peoples*, a new permanent exhibition that opened in September 2013 in the Bunjilaka Gallery of the Melbourne Museum in Australia.

Before I do so, however, it is necessary to pull out the distinctiveness of current practices and their differences from those used to support the pluralizing of perspectives described by Bennett (2006), by briefly indicating the existence of a second form of museological pedagogy – that of “a pedagogy of listening,” which I am not going to go into detail here. The contours of this pedagogical approach to understanding the civic role of museums can be illuminated by Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2002) arguments concerning the change from traditional liberal understandings of citizenship toward what he calls a performative understanding of citizenship. The difference between the two concerns, in part, their differing orientation to the senses. Whereas liberal traditions of citizenship posit that the citizen needs to be educated to be able to take up their political responsibilities, with the consequence that equipping them with the faculty of reason is the primary role of education, Chakrabarty argues that performative understandings of citizenship are much more prone to valuing sensorial forms of knowledge. This shift, he argues, was due to the rise of identity politics in the 1960s and 1970s in which the right of people to be heard became the basis of political engagement, causing a fundamental change in the ways in which the production of knowledge was understood. Key to this, Chakrabarty (2002, 7–8) argues, was a prioritizing of experience over abstract forms of reasoning, allowing more emotional and embodied forms of knowledge to take their place alongside the traditional faith in reason. Particularly significant forms of knowledge were those based on individual and collective forms of memory, attachments to place, and community. Citizenship

became a right to enact these forms of knowledge in the public sphere and to have them valued, or at least respected by others. Tolerance, then, was the aim of civic forms of education such as those provided by museums.

What did this look like within museums? Well, much as Barry (2001) and Bennett (2006) described it. This was the moment in which museums attempted to represent and engage with plurality. In responding to arguments such as the right of various minorities to control the ways in which their cultures were represented, and to do so in ways that were respectful of, and even embodied, their cultural values and beliefs, museums developed various ways of privileging the voice of experience rather than abstract categories of thought such as the nation. In their stead, particular, local, and lived forms of experiences were prioritized. Indigenous voices; migrant voices; working-class, women's, and children's voices were heard directly, in the first person, answering the call of modern mass democracies for forms of representation that embodied sensorial forms of knowledge that privileged memory and remembering.

It is this characteristic of hearing voices that leads me to describe this moment as one that involves a pedagogy of listening. While it is certainly true, as Barry (2001) puts it, that this moment involved a privileging of activity, often embodied in interactives and in notions of the active learner, based on "discovery approaches" to learning and constructivist epistemologies in which the visitor was given a role in the creation of knowledge (Hein 1998), what also stands out for me is that much of this activity required a form of attentive listening, encapsulated best of all by the extensive use of the phone handset as the means to provide direct access to oral histories which were the most prevalent way of providing access to experience and people's individual and collective memories across the social spectrum. Visitors thus lifted a handset, pressed a button, stood in front of an interactive screen, or played the role of someone else to be exposed to difference and learn to appreciate its value (Witcomb 2006). To walking, looking, and reading, visitors also now needed to add listening (though this listening practice could also be achieved by reading, as labels increasingly took on the voice of the first person rather than the distant third). Listening, as a pedagogical strategy, is as much a metaphor here as an embodied actual practice. The point is that different ways were found to enable the representation of a variety of voices rather than the older pedagogy of linear sequences supporting narratives of progress from only one point of view.

The mode of address, however, along with this privileging of the voice, was in the main declamatory. That is, while visitors were invited to listen to multiple voices and to take responsibility for doing so by choosing to activate that voice, the mode of communication was still largely didactic in its pedagogical approach as the communication was still a one-way broadcast model of communication (Witcomb 2006). Furthermore, while it was more democratic, few exhibitions sought to challenge the subjectivity of visitors in relation to the other. Thus minority groups were represented and their voices heard, but established relationships

between groups were maintained. As Ghassan Hage (1998) put it, museums became very good at “zoological multiculturalism” but there was still a dominant group and its relationship to the others was not in question.

It is exactly the quality of this relationship to the other that is changing under what I am calling the pedagogy of feeling. Its characteristic, I want to argue, is not the representation of plurality but the “enactment” (Basu and Macdonald 2007) of an ethics that promotes empathy rather than simply tolerance toward difference and which is, as a consequence, interested in promoting both dialogue and political responsibility. In this respect, I do not see the concept of tolerance as encapsulating current museological developments, though I would agree with Bennett (Chapter 1 in this volume) that tolerance does indeed capture the intended governmental effects of more pluralist forms of exhibition practices. I want to suggest that there is something qualitatively different between the aims of what I have described above as a pedagogy of listening and what I now want to describe as a pedagogy of feeling. In what follows, then, I want to explain how an exhibition such as *First Peoples* reflects this difference.

Like its predecessor in the same gallery space, *First Peoples* is a permanent exhibition that celebrates Indigenous culture(s) and Indigenous people’s resilience in the face of colonization. Unlike its predecessor, however, *First Peoples* offers a form of testimony that demands an ethical response on the part of those prepared to listen to its messages. These responses are not simply a call for reconciliation and respect for cultural differences but a political call to redress a wrong – in this case, the taking of Country by both subterfuge and force. How that argument is conducted is what is novel about this exhibition, illustrating very well the ways in which a pedagogy of feeling works. As we shall see, aesthetic strategies, including the use of parataxis, play a central role.

The exhibition is structured in three parts. The first, “Our Story,” deals with traditional Indigenous cultures before colonization, the arrival of the invaders, and the aftermath. The second part, “Many Nations,” deals with the variety and richness of Indigenous material culture within and beyond the boundaries of the state of Victoria, while the third, “Generations,” deals with themes of cultural continuity, resilience, and identity across generations of Indigenous families. While it is possible to see each section individually, the force of the exhibition’s poetics works most strongly if “Our Story” is seen first. This is the section that calls for an active form of citizenship by enacting what Roger Simon (2006) called a “terrible gift.”

A “terrible gift” is a notion developed by Simon in response to the problem of how to develop exhibitions that dealt with difficult histories, such as that of the Holocaust, which do more than simply repeat the injunction to remember. Simon was concerned with understanding the nature of the archive he and his colleagues were working with as more than evidence of the past. He was specifically interested in elucidating what he saw as their testamentary nature – that is, that these objects and documents had been put together in the past precisely in the hope of addressing someone in the future, with the full knowledge that the author of the

archive was unlikely to survive the circumstances in which they found themselves. The hope was not only that they would be heard beyond the grave, but also that, in hearing them, the listener would be motivated in their turn to work toward a future that was different from the past they had just witnessed. Inherent in Simon's understanding of testimony, then, is an understanding that the testifier is explicitly producing a gift that requires a level of reciprocity, in this case that of self-reflection and moral and political action (see also Nanette Auerhahn and Dori Laub's (1990) work on the nature of Holocaust testimony). Simon's question, therefore, had to do with how exhibitions can embody the testamentary nature of the artifact so that the exhibition is not simply a representation of the past, offering information, but is itself alive to the politics and ethics of testimony by creating a space in which it is possible to undertake the critical reflections that might lead to action outside the museum. As he puts it, the question is how to use our museums to produce a public history that is alive to the needs of the future and not just the need to know about the past in ways that challenge visitors to "accept the loss of what is familiar and recognizably reassuring in order to consider the prospects of remembering and living otherwise" (Simon 2006, 188).

In what follows, then, I am concerned not so much with understanding the individual objects and documents on display as a form of testimony about the past (which I have done before in relation to objects made by survivors of the Holocaust: Witcomb 2010a; 2013a) as with understanding the exhibition itself as a form of testimony about a difficult past. This involves thinking about the exhibition as a gift offered by those involved in its making in the hope that the witnesses to their testimony might be moved to action in the present in order to achieve a different future from the past.

The significance of narrative structure

How, then, does this notion of a terrible gift, one based on the testamentary nature of the exhibition as a whole, work within "Our Story"? I want to approach this question by looking at the narrative structure of the exhibition to begin with, before going into more detail about the specific aesthetic strategies that build up an exhibition syntax. At one level, the narrative is straightforward enough. It begins with the concept of Country and the unique relationship between people and their birthplace. This relationship is explained in terms of a series of mutual obligations in which both people and country sustain each other. Country, however, is elevated beyond an anthropological or cultural concept to explain Indigenous relationships to land, and given a deep spiritual and religious significance through creation stories. This is done, above all, through the use of aesthetic strategies in combination with multimedia presentations. The first example is a stunningly beautiful rendition of one version of the creation story through a kinetic sculpture of Bunjil, the ancestor creator spirit of the clans that inhabit the area where



FIGURE 16.1 Bunjil's wings kinetic sculpture in the *First Peoples* exhibition, Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum.

Photo: Dianna Snape Photography.

Melbourne now stands. As Bunjil, who is an eagle, flies, a multimedia presentation washes over him, representing his creation of the Country below him, from the seas and rivers to the mountains and plains, the animals, and eventually the people. Immersed in sound, poetry, and abstract visual representations over the moving sculpture (Figure 16.1), the audience is effectively treated to a spiritual experience from the perspective of Indigenous people. The installation is contained within a representation of a bird's nest which offers a warm, encircling womb in which to tell the story of creation. Darkness surrounds the bird/ancestor spirit. He provides all color and all life. At the affective level, the artwork conveys mystery on a grand scale, a sense of sacredness, and, as a consequence of these two, a sense of privilege at being able to witness his creation for those who are not Indigenous. We are being invited into another group's sacred stories and enclosed within it. In a sense, we are being inducted into their belief systems with the consequence that we, too, then have a responsibility to play our role in caring for creation – Country. We are being handed a gift and with that gift comes responsibility. What that responsibility is, though, is not quite clear yet.

The second example is the use of aesthetic treatments of information to convey the ways in which Country is a being for Indigenous people and thus a central character in the story. For example, the very first display is a multimedia station with a map of the different language groups, each represented by a message stick, which, if rubbed over, "speaks" the name of the language (Figure 16.2). When this is done en masse, by passing your hand over the sticks, the land is populated with dozens of Indigenous communities once again. Behind it, in slowly rendered dissolves, are images of the Victorian landscape without people. Time and place are slowed down, becoming timeless. Anyone who is aware of the history of colonial Australia would feel the tension between presence and absence, between past and



FIGURE 16.2 Language map showing the message sticks and the relationship to Country at the entry to the *First Peoples* exhibition, Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum. Photo: Andrea Witcomb. Courtesy of Museum Victoria.

present, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. We don't need a narrative about the impact of colonization or the relationship between people, identity, language, and country – we feel it, even without reading the various testimonies (located to the left of the interactive) of present-day Indigenous Australians, young and old, attesting to the importance of language to their identity and sense of belonging to Country.

The use of the slow dissolve is also employed in another centerpiece which visitors see before entering Bunjil's nest – a display of one of the oldest possum cloaks still extant. Possum cloaks are a special kind of blanket given to newborns, made from possum fur stitched together using sinew and bone needles. They provide not only warmth but a visual and sensorial connection to the child's Country, as the inside skin of the fur, which is worn on the outside, is etched with drawings that signify the Country to which that child belongs. They are a walking painting, but also a way of enclosing that child within their Country, giving it its protection. Indigenous people wore these cloaks throughout their lives, and today elders use them on ceremonial occasions. In the case of this display, the cloak is presented lying flat, in darkened light. Behind it, on the wall, are images of the Country that is marked on it – Murray River Country in northern Victoria. Once again, images of the landscape dissolve as if to become one with the cloak, implicitly making the connections between the cloak's markings and the country it marks. The markings on the cloak itself are also transferred onto the images of the landscape in particular images, making the point even clearer. The display thus creates a space which is redolent with the collective memory of the significance of Country for Indigenous

people and which we, as whites, get to sense but not understand to its full extent. A number of elders also speak about this relationship, helping to make manifest what we sense in the juxtaposition of cloak and images. By the time we get to the central kinetic sculpture representing the creation story, we are already sensitized to the significance of Country to Indigenous identity and spiritual well-being.

While critics have accused the museum of an irresponsible acceptance of religious beliefs without sufficient balance from the archaeological record (Vines 2013), it is important to ask what it is that the museum and the Yulendj (group of Elders) who collaborated with the curators to create this exhibition were aiming for with these strategies. To me, the answer is in what follows – an understanding, particularly for non-Indigenous Australians, of the impact of colonization on Aboriginal well-being and, for Indigenous people, a deeply moving memorial. A message stick, a couple of paintings, and some words are all that are needed to suggest the arrival of the British and all that ensued – cultural and physical devastation. The image of the messenger and his stick, which in traditional society is a figure who is given license to travel between territories with messages from one group to another which are carved onto the stick, is used to communicate the ways in which this traditional form of communication between language groups unwittingly spread devastation by carrying smallpox in advance of the newcomers. Messengers were used by Indigenous groups to warn of the arrival of strangers in their midst, but many of them, unknowingly, carried the smallpox virus with them. An emotive installation by Indigenous artist Maree Clarke, referencing traditional mourning customs, mourns the dead, creating a passage through which we pass into the period of dispossession (Figure 16.3).

The central anchor of the second part of the story is the story of Batman's Treaty, between John Batman, a business entrepreneur, and local Indigenous Elders, which is traditionally understood within settler society to represent a negotiated settlement for the exchange of land between the two groups. In this exhibition, the treaty is characterized not only as a lie and, therefore, an unethical beginning to any political settlement between the two groups, but as the basis of the real crime perpetrated by the colonial government – the refusal to abide by the Law of Tanderrum, which held that, while visitors could be welcomed onto Country, there was also an expectation that they would leave after a time without causing any harm. In the case of the colonization of Victoria, the visitors overstayed their welcome, forced the removal of people from Country, and were therefore responsible for the consequent spiritual breakdown of the people. As a virtual “messenger” that accompanies us throughout the exhibition exclaims, this is the moment when “our story becomes your story too.”

Batman was a grazier, businessman, and explorer. A bit of an entrepreneur, he wanted to take up land in the Port Phillip area in what is now Melbourne as a commercial venture. He thought that he could acquire this by purchasing it from the local Indigenous people, sealing the agreement with a treaty. While this was the only such treaty in the history of the colonization of Australia, it had no legal basis



FIGURE 16.3 Maree Clarke, *Meen Warrann* (smallpox) in the *First Peoples* exhibition, Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum.

Photos: Peter Wilson (*left*) and Dianna Snape (*right*). Courtesy of Museum Victoria.

either within the colonial government or indeed among the Indigenous people, who had no cultural framework within which to understand what Batman was offering them and, even if they had, would have refused it, according to their descendants whose voices we hear in this exhibition (Figure 16.4).

What follow are stories of resistance, accommodation to new realities, and the continuity of culture despite changed circumstances. The point of elevating Country to a religion equal to any other in the world is to make people “feel” the extent of the devastation and to create the space for a moral argument for the need to redress this basic wrong. The exhibition is not simply about the need to communicate information about the culture and belief systems of the Indigenous people of Victoria or of their experiences during colonization and its aftermath; it is also to use this information to prosecute a political and moral argument aimed at both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and all those who came after to take action in the present for a better future. In other words, the exhibition functions like a “terrible gift,” calling on those who witness its testamentary character to do something to right a wrong.

To do so, poetics, rather than rational discourse using didactic forms of communication, are used. This, I would argue, is why Museum Victoria both allowed and supported the voices of the Elders whom they brought together to collaborate



FIGURE 16.4 Treaty and Tanderrum section of “Our Story” in the *First Peoples* exhibition, Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum.

Photo: Dianna Snape Photography.

with them in the making of the exhibition to be primary.² As I have argued elsewhere (Witcomb 2014), in many ways this exhibition gives body to Clifford’s (1997) call for museums to enact their responsibilities as a “contact zone” when working with First Peoples (for a discussion of Clifford’s arguments, see Chapter 13 by Kylie Message in this volume; Witcomb 2003; and Boast 2011). To privilege Indigenous voices in this way does, of course, place Museum Victoria firmly on one side of debates as to whether or not museums should interfere in contemporary political debates and causes (Janes 2009; Silverman 2010; Marstine 2011). That it does this using an aesthetic mode of display shows just how important the poetics of exhibitions has become to the ways in which museums conduct their political actions.

While the above is a summary of the structure of the exhibition as a reflection of its central argument, I want to linger a while longer and focus in on the parataxical qualities of the exhibition as a whole, for these carry much of the affective argument, indicating just how a pedagogy of feeling is achieved. It would also be remiss of me not to indicate that each of the points I discuss below was the result of an extensive process of collaboration: every detail of the exhibition, from narrative structure to text, to which stories were chosen and who told them, to the selection of images and objects, as well as design details, was discussed and agreed on by a group of Elders who worked with the museum staff to create the exhibition. Their intention was to instill a sense of pride in the value of their culture and

their resilience in the face of colonization not only in their own communities, but also in the broader Australian population in ways that implicated the latter in this history. Their aim was very clearly focused on two audiences and their message very clear – they wanted everyone to understand the significance of Country and to act accordingly. Eileen Alberts, for example, explained that:

I hope to share it with everyone. I hope that non-Aboriginal people, non-Indigenous people of Victoria, will gain a greater understanding of how we care for our land and care for us so that perhaps they'll step on our Country a little more softly and not harm it as much.³

The first of these strategies, then, is the use of a range of contrasts that are aligned with each other, so as to build up an emotional language across the exhibition experience. Here I will focus on two pairs that go together – light and darkness, and warmth and coolness. As indicated above, light and darkness are used in Bunjil's nest to communicate Indigenous creation stories as sacred knowledge equal to any of the world's creation stories. Bunjil literally brings light and color to the world, which was nothing before his arrival – only a vast, empty darkness. Light and darkness, though, is also a strategy used to create an emotional tension between displays. Thus, for example, while the early part of the exhibition uses light to illuminate the connection between people and Country, shaping this connection as essential to Indigenous well-being, darkness is used to indicate the collapse of this harmonious state. The first indication of this is the experience of moving from displays about the connection to Country, explained not only in the three installations described above but also in smaller displays on traditional ways of living in Country, dealing with the hunting and gathering of food and the connection between these practices and sacred rituals, to the section dealing with invasion. As mentioned above, this occurs through a passageway that is a memorial to those who died of smallpox. Black and dark red, to denote spilt blood, are the dominant colors, with the stark white of the mourning caps worn by the women standing out in silent vigil. The somberness of the installation is then underlined with the sound of a dirge – a song sung by Indigenous artists whose words communicate the grief experienced by Indigenous groups across the country (Figure 16.4).

While it would be possible to critique this exhibition by arguing that it is in danger of romanticizing the Indigenous past prior to colonization – which in many ways it does do in order to make its political point stronger – the contrast between light and darkness is also used within Indigenous culture itself. Thus, the light that Bunjil represents is balanced by a sculpture of Waa, the crow, whose story is told through dance in a visual installation behind the sculpture. Waa, a beautiful bird with a very colorful plumage, grew jealous of Bunjil's power and went away to bring back fire, with which he destroyed his Country, seeking to hurt Bunjil. Bunjil

punished him for this behavior by taking away his beautiful plumage and turning him into a black crow. Working metaphorically, the creators of the exhibition use this story to warn of the pitfalls of not following the laws of creation – these being loss of identity, social disintegration, and, as a consequence, the loss of relationship with Country leading to a sad state for both. The message here is intended for both Indigenous people, who know the story, and non-Indigenous people, for whom the story can readily be understood in terms of the wider discussions occasioned by climate change as to the need to care for our environment better if we wish to avoid our own destruction.

The other contrast is between warmth, used to signify community and belonging, and coldness, used to signify loss of community and belonging. Warmth is created in the precolonial section by the representation of closely linked kinship groups, familial relations, and relations with Country. The colors used to embody these relations include the greens and golds of the Australian landscape. In the postinvasion section, warmth continues, but this time in the colors of the Aboriginal flag – red, yellow, and black – which symbolize Aboriginal resistance to colonialism and pride in the maintenance of culture and kinship links despite attempts to destroy these. For example, a subtheme of “Standing Strong,” which represents the continuity of tradition, has a background of yellow behind the title label, while Indigenous resistance sometimes uses a background of red. Loss is represented first of all through color – blacks, grays, and whites. In Indigenous society white is a color for mourning, unlike Western society where it is black. Grays are used as the background for instances of bureaucratic coldness during the colonial period where the third-person voice of the authorities is also very strong through, for example, a wall of extracts from various pieces of legislation that negatively affect Indigenous people.

Gray and black are also the colors used to deal with war. In Australia, there has always been an official refusal to recognize invasion and the colonization process as involving explicit warfare against Indigenous people. Thus, at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, where the sacrifice of Australians during wartime is recognized, honored, and memorialized, there is no recognition of the Indigenous dead during what historian Henry Reynolds ([1982] 1995) has called the Frontier Wars. In *First Peoples* the bittersweet knowledge of this lack of recognition is made all the more powerful by the recognition, within the exhibition, of the involvement of Indigenous soldiers fighting for Australia as part of the armed forces during wartime, particularly the two world wars.

Parataxis is also at play in the way in which images are used. As hinted at in the discussion of the possum cloak, the juxtaposition of images with objects is used to embody relations between people and Country. Thus, images of the landscape are used to create a link between object and people in ways that provide more than background or context, as in the traditional anthropological exhibition, but are used instead to give affective force to the emotive power of the objects. The role

of the images, then, is not only to provide further information, but also to embody the sacred relations between people and Country. Images help the objects to perform their significance providing an immersive experience for the visitor in ways that play to cultural memory and historical knowledge.

The second strategy of juxtaposition is between words and images. It involves what might be called a redemptive use of the traditional image of museums as an information bank that shows no respect for the feelings of the other. In the “Generations” section of the exhibition, after “Our Story,” a wall of the gallery is covered with equal-sized photographs of Indigenous people – historical and contemporary portrait shots, images of family groups and sometimes of community events, some famous, some not. Beneath this wall of images is a series of digital labels – touch screens which enable each image to be accessed, leading to the details of who is represented and quite often a statement from them or their descendants. The value of being able to establish a correspondence between each image and the informational content provided by the digital labels cannot be reduced to information in the sense of dry, matter-of-fact knowledge. The display was made possible by a process of visual repatriation (Edwards 2003), whereby every image was taken back to the community in an attempt not only to return the images of people to their descendants but also to establish who each person in these photographs was and their story. Organized according to the themes of “Culture,” “Connections,” “Family,” and “Resilience,” the display works by facilitating storytelling rather than simply communicating archival information. It is not uncommon, for example, to see groups of Indigenous people standing in front of the images, pointing to them and talking among themselves, sharing stories of the family members and friends represented there, or memories of a particular place. The display thus stands in stark contrast to the traditional use of such images as background material to situate material culture but not to humanize and personalize individuals. The display is, as a consequence, saturated with culture in ways that embody understandings of Country as sacred and as the ground of Indigenous identity.

A pedagogy of feeling is also produced in strategies other than parataxis. One of these is the geometric design of some of the displays, which invite the visitor to sense the privilege they are being offered. One of these concerns a project which also involved visual repatriation – this time of a series of sketches by Wilhelm von Blandowski⁴ found in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin from the period when he had worked for the National Museum of Victoria (as the institution was then known), undertaking, among other things, fieldwork along the Murray River: this included collecting natural specimens and documenting Indigenous communities through drawings. In taking these drawings back to the communities, a process of repatriation of traditional cultural practices was initiated and documented by the museum through film. Present-day Indigenous communities along the Murray River in northern Victoria used the visual information contained within these sketches to re-enact various cultural practices and, in the process, reconnect with their ancestors. The

visitor experiences the privilege of witnessing this revival by looking at a film of it. However, the film is not simply placed on a touch screen for the visitor to access in front of either original or replica objects used in the film. Instead, it is displayed at an angle to the showcase containing these objects. With three showcases and a magnified copy of one of the original drawings forming the fourth line of a square, the films turn the display into an intimate circle. Visitors have to angle their bodies to see them, and to peer through a slit, rather like looking through a window as they go up the tower of a medieval cathedral. Looking through the tiny slit, one experiences in fact a broadening of the horizon into another world. To look into and out into these films is to experience a sense of enormous privilege at witnessing something private, meaningful, and spiritual. We know we are being handed a gift from these communities.

Circles are commonly used within the exhibition to create a sense of intimacy and a space for quiet reflection. The nest that encloses Bunjil and his creation of the world is another example, as is the statue of Waa which faces the representation of his story through dance (discussed above). Below this film of shadowy dancers and the light of flickering flames, there is a curved seat made of wood. Sitting on it, the visitor can look out not only onto the sculpture of Waa but at the images of the history of Indigenous resistance to the taking away of their human rights on the opposite wall, framed by the colors of the Aboriginal flag. In this quiet corner, it is possible to sit and reflect on the testamentary nature of the exhibition, including its call to action. Such spaces interrupt the more standard design of a flow of corridors connecting a series of rectangular spaces that contain traditional showcases with objects, text, images, and a wide variety of voices, mostly in the first person. They create what Paul Basu (2007) calls a unicursal labyrinth, which, with its twists and turns and despite its central linearity, creates a requirement for labor on our part. The point of this labor, in a pedagogy of feeling, is a call to action.

All of these techniques are given emotive force by the testamentary nature of the first-person voices that fill the exhibition. The exhibition is saturated with the voices of the named Elders who worked with the museum to create the exhibition. They speak directly to the audience in written and spoken (aural form) about their own and their families' experiences, and engage directly with the issues at hand. They explain Indigenous concepts, put arguments forward, and share their collective experiences and memories. We are embedded within a world in which the Indigenous voice predominates and in which Indigenous storytelling about the past, the present, and their hopes for the future work to create a space that James Clifford called a contact zone – a space in which storytelling is to be understood as a gift that demands a reciprocal gift, in which power relations evidence a push and a pull that cannot be reduced to a one-way system in which the colonized have no agency. In this exhibition, Indigenous people have agency and, moreover, they implicate both Indigenous and non-Indigenous visitors in their story, in ways that pull us toward a shared sense of responsibility.

The last technique, which brings all of these techniques together, has to do with the affective impact of the narrative structure itself. As I have discussed elsewhere (Witcomb 2010b), immersive exhibitions often invite the visitor to construct the narrative not in a sequential manner but retrospectively, using what Simon Johnson (2005), discussing video games, described as a cognitive workout consisting of three tasks: seeking, probing, and telescoping. “Seeking” (37) is characterized by an openness to explore the world on the screen: looking for clues and actively putting the puzzle together. At its base is a willingness to experience a certain sense of aimlessness or being lost. Control can be achieved only by interpreting the clues in a process Johnson calls “probing” and “telescoping” (41). Probing involves experimenting, as the rules of video games are never a pregiven. They become apparent only as you play. Recognizing them involves “detecting subtle patterns and tendencies in the way the computer is running the simulation” (44). It is a process that involves recognizing how the game involves a series of nests each of which fits neatly into the next. Understanding the objectives of the game involves a temporal dimension in which short-term objectives are important because of the role they play in the long-term ones. Managing all of these objectives and understanding the relationships between them is what telescoping is about. The narrative of the game, however, is only produced in retrospect, when all the tasks have been completed. In video games, narrative is not a story which one follows; rather, it is the end product of engaging in the game, of interacting with the medium. Probing and telescoping are, thus, forms of cultural practice that encourage analysis and participatory thinking.

The point is fairly similar to Bal’s (2007) in her discussion of the narrative structure of *Partners* – that the narrative is coproduced with the visitor who makes sense of the whole only retrospectively, by building on the accumulative effect of the sequence of displays they have just experienced. While there is a sequence, its narrative force only strikes the visitor slowly and through their own labor. It is precisely by engaging, through labor, with the labyrinthine (Basu 2007) nature of the exhibition – its twists and turns, and its slow release of the whole, the sensorial accumulation of all the contrasts and techniques discussed above – that meaning can be produced by the visitor. The instruction to “look, listen and feel” by a virtual Indigenous messenger that appears at key moments in the exhibition – after the Bunjil creation story, before the memorial, and just before the Batman Treaty section – is a pointer to how the exhibition needs to be engaged with – sensorially. Significantly, this involvement of other senses places vision on an equal footing with hearing and feeling in ways that are not simply indicative of a practice of looking framed by an empiricist epistemology. Instead, vision is given an affective agency because of its imbrication with the other senses.

In *First Peoples*, the narrative structure is very similar to all of these descriptions of narrative not as a linear sequence but as a result of particular sequences, which have a cumulative effect and are the result of particular kinds of labor. Thus, the recognition on the part of the visitor that the past is part of our present only

emerges retrospectively as we “telescope” all the different sections of the exhibition and begin to apprehend its narrative structure. The process relies on feeling our way toward it in response to all the clues provided by the sequencing of displays, the use of contrasts, and the first-person testimony. While there is a strong chronology, what emerges is not that the past is past but, rather, that it continues to live in the present and that this situation requires work on our part to remedy it. Thus, for example, it is only after going through the memorial to Meen-Warran and the early example of the effects of colonization that one begins to understand the point of focusing on the creation story of Bunjil and on the concept of Country as part of a strategy to implicate non-Indigenous visitors in the Indigenous experience rather than simply communicating information about another culture. The full implications of the “gift” are not made clear until later. As Basu (2007, 53) argues, in discussing the labyrinthine nature of contemporary exhibition-making, it is time we stop understanding narrative as a scheme for imposing coherence on disorder and, instead, recognize that narratives, too, can be labyrinthine, “both orderly and disorderly, continuous and discontinuous, tending at once towards closure and disclosure.” Furthermore, they do so in the space between the textual characteristics of the exhibition, the interaction of the visitor with those characteristics, and, not least, the agency of the curators, which, in this case, involved a close collaboration between institutional staff and elders from across the state of Victoria in what was a concerted effort to implicate Museum Victoria in a form of Indigenous politics that demands the involvement of the rest of Australian society. In a pedagogy of feeling, then, there is the possibility of redemption precisely because there is an open invitation to change the future. But that redemption is open-ended, still to be made. It is an invitation, just as the final words of “Our Story” suggest: “and our journey continues” – with “our” meaning not just Indigenous Australians but *all* Australians.

Conclusions

Clearly, the notion of the gift – in the senses discussed by both Simon (2006) and Clifford (1997) – is key to understanding how this exhibition works and what is involved in establishing a pedagogy of feeling. In this context, gifts are given with the expectation of reciprocity. But visitors need to understand what is being offered first, and that requires a dismantling of received narratives and collective memories. Doing so requires a whole range of strategies and techniques that work at a sensorial, affective level, before they can work at a rational, explicit level of directly communicating an argument or position. Hence the aims of this exhibition are literally to be understood and practiced by “looking, feeling and listening,” exactly as requested by the messenger figure that pops up on a screen at key points in the exhibition’s narrative structure. It is only by doing so, and by engaging in that labor, that the accumulative narrative structure begins to work itself on the visitor.

In concluding, I suggest that this process is now at a stage of development that requires a further theorization of the relationship between affect and our understanding of what is entailed in being a good citizen. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, Chakrabarty (2002) associates the development of immersive exhibitions which privilege first-person narrative with the politics of identity and what he calls performative understandings of citizenship. As I have argued here, however, the point of the first-person narrative we are witness to in *First Peoples* is not simply about a politics of identity, though that is clearly also registered here. It is also, through the notion of the gift, about initiating a conversation across cultural divides in ways that embed us in each other's worlds. We can no longer maintain boundaries between us, or, at the very least, we are asked not to do so. The demand here is not to tolerate each other but rather to have enough empathy to want to right a wrong. That, I argue, requires a different understanding of citizenship, which, while incorporating notions of performativity, does something else as well. That something else, I suggest, is what Joke Hermes and Peter Dahlgren point toward in their chapter in this volume (Chapter 7), where they discuss what they call the radical republican democratic tradition of citizenship. In this body of ideas about citizenship, it is the notion of active participation in society that defines modern forms of citizenship. Rather than privileging the rights of individuals, something that is central to classical liberal forms of citizenship in which there is minimal state "interference" in the daily lives of citizens, in the republican tradition Hermes and Dahlgren privilege there is an insistence on the value of individual involvement in public life. This is seen not simply as a citizenly duty but also as something that actively contributes to social cohesion.

Hermes and Dahlgren are particularly interested in the "radical democracy" model of this republican tradition.⁵ According to them, "radical democracy" emphasizes the contextual nature of identity and views political struggle as an ongoing process as new contexts and, therefore, new publics arise. An important aspect of this way of understanding democratic forms of political activity is the centrality of difference. This requires groups to build alliances with each other in order to build a public for themselves. Citizenship in this model, then, is the result of political activity on the part of citizens. This also points to another marker of difference from the liberal tradition, and that is an extended understanding of what counts as political so that the meaning of politics is not constrained by formal systems of politics but encompasses political activity in its widest sense. What matters are the encounters between groups within civic spaces and how those encounters can lead to political activity and thus to an enactment of citizenship.

As with Chakrabarty's differences between pedagogic and performative understandings of citizenship, there is also a different value placed on reason and emotion. While the liberal tradition tends to prioritize reason and has tended to understand the emotional life of citizens as a threat, the radical republican tradition has much more space for emotion, seeing the human subject as consisting of both reason and affect. An important consequence of these differences is the belief

that participation in politics and society must involve reason and affect as well as a wide variety of opportunities to participate in civil society. As such, the radical republican tradition seems to offer a further development on Chakrabarty's distinction between pedagogic and performative forms of citizenship insofar as it allows for the possibility that the very act of participation, using both reason and affect, is in itself an activity that shapes what it is to be a good citizen. It is also possible to see how the stress on both participation and the use of affect and reason connects with the ways in which both Simon and Clifford point to the reciprocal expectations of gift-giving, indicating one of the ways in which museums have become, as Basu and Macdonald (2007) argue, spaces that enact and enable the performance of encounters between different groups of people. Taken together, then, we have a constellation of ideas that help to explain not only what is going on in the work of a pedagogy of feeling but also how this work is achieved.

Notes

- 1 The research for this chapter forms part of an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP120100594) looking at the history of the Australian Collecting Sector's engagement with cultural diversity and changing ideas of citizenship. I thank the ARC for their support. It also builds on my work in two other publications (Witcomb 2015) and attempts to bring the various strands of my arguments together.
- 2 For a discussion of this group and the collaborative nature of the way this exhibition was developed, see Witcomb (2014). In an interview about the development of this exhibition (October 7, 2013), the lead curator for *Our Story*, Amanda Reynolds, explained to me that the Yulendj group of Elders with whom she worked consciously chose not to work through the traditional authoritative voice of the museum telling their story, but to take her advice that their message would be apprehended much better if they told their stories in their own voice. In one of their meetings, she showed them a label written by her of one of the modules telling one of their stories. She then showed them a visual recording of an Indigenous curator telling exactly the same story. She put it to them that "Our visitors can either come and read this panel to learn, or they can come here and experience your tone and voice and sound." They unanimously chose the latter because they wanted their audiences to feel and listen more than they wanted them to learn "information."
- 3 <http://museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/visiting/first-peoples/creating-first-peoples/> (accessed October 22, 2014).
- 4 Blandowski was a German zoologist and mining engineer who became the first scientist appointed to the then new National Museum of Victoria in 1854 (later Museum Victoria). He made sketches of Indigenous communities along the Murray River in Victoria while on an expedition to collect biological specimens, especially fish, for the museum.
- 5 See also the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) and Mouffe's own later work (2000; 2005), which provide the basis for Dahlgren and Hermes's arguments.

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