Cultural diversity and Australia’s museums

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Humankind has constantly been mobile for differing reasons and in constant degrees. This article looks at some of the background into the evolution of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. Both terms are used interchangeably throughout this work. The policy of multiculturalism or cultural diversity is based on the concept of rights and respect for the diversity of cultures that exist.

Language as an expression

Inherent in multiculturalism is diversity of language. In addition to the figure of over 150 Aboriginal languages currently in use, a number closely approximating this in ‘community languages’ are also in use in Australia today. The term ‘community languages’ has been used since the mid-1970s to describe those languages outside either English or Aboriginal languages used in Australia.¹ In the 1986 Census 13.63 per cent of the Australian population (at that time 15,604,150) used a language other than English at home and/or elsewhere. Despite this, monolingualism was the only policy that had ever been promoted by governments.

Language is not only an instrument of action but a means by which an individual can identify others and him or herself. Perhaps an early articulation of multiculturalism came from Raffaelo Carboni at the Eureka Stockade in 1854 when he invited all, ‘irrespective of nationality, religion or colour’, to salute the rebel diggers’ flag.² Aside from seeking common loyalty to a cause by this statement, he was in fact acknowledging the cultural diversity of Australia at that time. Indeed, earlier migrations to Australia had been of German Lutherans escaping from religious oppression, other Europeans fleeing European revolutions, American adventurers seeking gold along with Irish, Welsh and Chinese, while Polish, English and Russian Jews hopefully sought a land without anti-Semitism.

Languages other than English have been an important part of Australia’s cultural development. German-language newspapers, schools, church services, names of towns and streets abounded in South Australia until World War I. There were private and religious bi-lingual schools, and at least 100 existed at the turn of the last century; mainly in the Victorian and South Australian colonies. In Sydney both Hebrew and German existed in schools. Little evidence of bi­-lingual schools existed in colonial Queensland at this time, although it had the largest German-born population and sizeable communities of Italian, Scandinavian and Russian migrants.³

The proliferation of newspapers that existed from the 1830s onward began the process of openly debating Australian identity versus empire loyalty, and as early as 1871 the Australian Natives’ Association urged Australian independence. European nationalism, Australian Federation and ultimately World War I brought Australia to monolingualism. The War Precautions Act (29 October 1914: amended 30 April 1915) was used to intern and/or deport residents of German background in Australia. Moreover, schools were closed, German-language newspapers and church sermons prohibited.⁴ German-named
town and street names were Anglicised. World War II and the xenophobic attitudes which had persisted through the period between both wars set the scene for a monolingual Australian population which was about to experience a mass migration of non-English-speaking people from Europe and then (from 1974) from other countries throughout the world.

Australia’s recognition of other cultures evolved from assimilation to integration and then onto multiculturalism. Historically, the colonial governments up until the mid-1870s neither supported nor discouraged cultural diversity. With the emergence of a pro-Australian identity attitude by native-born Australians, this spirit of multilingualism started to shift as the colonies joined and Australia became a Federation. World War I brought mixed feelings and saw opposing camps develop, not only between Australian and Gerrhan-born, but between pro-Empire and Irish-Australian, anti-conscription forces and pro-Empire Prime Minister Hughes. In post-World War II Australia, loyalty moved away from Britain and toward the United States. Ironically, at a time when masses of non-English-speaking people were arriving on its shores, Australia was itself being subjected to a cultural invasion of English and American media products.

The demography of multiculturalism
Both Arthur Calwell and Ben Chifley saw the post-World War II immigration policy as a strengthening force in maintaining the White Australia Policy. European migration provided a defence against the perceived ‘yellow peril’ and the threatening ‘domino theory’ of communism, while additionally rescuing
Europeans from not only the devastations of war but also communism. Many migrants from Britain and Europe arriving in Australia after World War II worked on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme and others were employed in Whyalla and Elizabeth in South Australia, and Port Kembla and Wollongong in NSW. Eventually these migrants gravitated toward the inner-urban areas of the capital cities and along with ‘chain migration’, (overseas family members following migrants) portions of those urban areas became small ethnic communities. Italian concentrations formed in Sydney’s Leichhardt and Melbourne’s Carlton. Further diversity within diversity took place as regional communities within nationalities also formed. For example, southern Italians from Calabria settled in the Fairfield, Liverpool and Eastwood suburbs of Sydney, while northern Italians settled in Haberfield and Leichhardt. In these older and inner-city suburbs housing became available through an ageing population and ‘deceased estates’ which were available and accessible in price to migrants. At the same time younger Australians were buying homes and trying to fulfil the ‘Australian dream’ of a new home on a quarter-acre block in the newer outer suburbs.

Limited job opportunities and economic hardship were mainly the reasons for migrants leaving their European homelands to come to Australia. Thus, concentrations of migrants usually existed near employment. Newly-formed ethnic clubs, churches, associations and communities provided stability for migrants and their families. Soon small businesses started by migrants also sprang up and these ethnic communities were reinforced by ‘chain migration’. While ethnic communities provide stability, they also reduced the necessity for communication with either different migrant or Australian communities. It is beneficial for varying cultures and languages to interact while maintaining their own linguistic credentials.

Conflicts surrounding multiculturalism in Australia

So-called ‘common-sense’ antipathy to immigration often surfaces as large waves of migrants arrive. In addition to their ‘being different’, ‘not speaking English’ and other racially-based excuses, this hostility increases when the economy, employment and environment are threatened. Today’s racism is no different to the racist fears that overtook white Australians when Chinese labour arrived to work the gold fields (on a contractual-termed basis and therefore not as immigrants) in the 1850s. But because of their colour and speech, migrants (and Aboriginal people) are identifiable and vulnerable targets for these attacks.

Migrants, neatly put into the ‘them’ of the ‘us-and-them’ theory are not alone. Australian Aborigines have suffered the fate of being different to the white population for over 200 years. In what constituted a white definition of ‘civilisation’, (i.e. releasing them from degrading conditions to educate them), the New South Wales government seized Aboriginal children from their parents.
These children were later apprenticed into a cheap labour force. 'Mixed-blood' Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory were taken from their parents and light-skinned Aboriginal children in Victoria were not allowed to live on reserves.7 These practices, with variations in time and colony/state existed from 1883 to 1969. In the 1950s, Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, heralded a 'new deal' for Aboriginal people.8 The message was that Aboriginal culture was 'bad' and they were urged to shun their tribal relations for the reward of being made exempt from black status. Although the latter part of the next decade brought recognition in the Australian census count and citizenship (to people that inhabited the land at least 40,000 years before those granting them this citizenship) the resultant chaos to Aboriginal culture is immeasurable. Its backlash is still very evident today with Aboriginals who have experienced this cultural savagery.

Without a vote Aboriginal people were permitted to enlist in the military forces and pay taxes in a country which did not recognise their existence. A temporary exhibition at the Australian War Memorial Museum in 1993, which later travelled, called 'Too Dark for the Lighthorse' outlined their plight as follows:

Aborigines in the First World War had served on the same terms as whites, but after the war, in areas such as education, employment and civil liberties, Aboriginal ex-servicemen and women found that discrimination remained or, indeed, had worsened during the war. … only one Aborigine is known to have received land under a 'soldier settlement' scheme. … as late as 1928 Aborigines were being massacred in reprisal raids by whites. A considerable Aboriginal political movement in the 1930s achieved little improvement in civil rights. In 1939 Aborigines were divided over whether they should serve (at the outbreak of World War II). Aborigine William Cooper … demanded that the Aborigines' lot be improved at home before they take up 'the privilege' of defending the land which was taken from him by the white race without compensation or even kindness.9

The portrayal of multicultural history at museums

As divergent cultures do co-exist within the Australian multicultural context, how then are they represented in the portrayal of Australian history at museums? The display of objects alone fails to recall the hardships, hopes and joys experienced by the people who used them to sustain and enhance their lives. Even photographs depicting the happy faces of migrants on ships entering Australia tell little or nothing of the story of immigration.9

Regardless of the object, there must also be a willingness to look beyond for interpretation. Historical records can be filled with manipulation and juxtapositioning, while photographs can be posed or set up to convey particular meanings and personal accounts and are also fraught with inaccuracies.

The object serves merely as an illustration of the role it played. Be it an original or a replica, it is meaningless in itself unless it conveys a relative position in a world of change. It can be seen as a tool used to reconstruct the past and
interpret the role of humankind, change and unique events. ‘Experiences, not just the objects involved ... are what the material culture student should strive to comprehend’, according to Thomas Schlereth, a leading American proponent of ‘total history’. They form a crucial part of understanding society. The curator is the catalyst that links the viewer to the artefact. How this takes effect is the determinant factor.

Since its beginnings in 1986, the South Australian Migration Museum’s policy for exhibitions is to ‘interpret the history and cultural traditions of the many different groups which have settled in South Australia’. Stressed throughout the Migration Museum’s policy statement is appreciation for the richness of diversity that exists within South Australia’s multicultural population and the museum’s desire to display this through continued encouragement and involvement of community. The South Australian Migration Museum interacts with the community to supply material culture, which is then researched by museum staff and community and jointly developed into an exhibition.

‘Blind spots’ to multiculturalism in museum exhibition

There is an unfortunate tendency recently to entertain in presenting history. Unfortunate only because of the way it has grown and fed on itself! After decades of history offered in a dull and pompously educative manner, historical portrayal moved away from the celebratory to a social history. But even in its social history phase, the presentation of cultural diversity was not a prime essential requirement. Many depictions were nostalgic and sanitised. The move to ‘entertainment’ is much in the same mode as television and video game viewing. Visitors are bombarded with bright lights and quick glimpses; ‘do not touch’ has advanced the full spectrum to an array of buttons and levers which invite usage, but not necessarily concentration or understanding. Just as a museum display which is overloaded with unrelated artefacts without a theme leaves the viewer totally disoriented, so has museum entertainment often gone overboard in its desire to attract visitors. Attracting visitors is only commensurate with having people look into a shop window with nothing more to follow.

In museum presentation as entertainment, it is often difficult to portray history with sufficient depth. In Thomas Jefferson’s home at Monticello, Virginia, there are enthralling accounts of Jefferson, his intellectual agility and the history surrounding his life. The beautiful home which depicts his life, however, was maintained by black slaves. Nowhere in the narration during a tour is this mentioned nor anything about them or their lives at Monticello. The euphemism used for ‘slaves’ by the tour guide, when pointing out their quarters, is instead, ‘servants’. Visitors are therefore led to believe that this great man’s history exists alone. Other histories were taking place concurrently at Monticello. It is sometimes said, however, that Jefferson himself never referred to his slaves as such but referred to them as servants. This is problematic.
The existence of blind spots in Australia's history can be a self-image problem.

Pilgrims came to the United States praying, convicts to Australia cursing... America was settled out of idealism [while] Australia settled out of compulsion.1

The spirit of progression and migration was similar in both but the means and time-frames varied. The Australian 1871 census listed 72 per cent of the population native-born (Aborigines were not counted!), but Ned Kelly in his famous Jerilderie letter spoke of himself as being Irish even though he was Australian born.2

There are much larger questions to be addressed by this void for those who exercise the will and power to define identity for the community. People, not objects, have the authority to make the judgements about how to portray the past. When museum visitors say a depiction is realistic, what is meant might be that it matches their expectations. If these depictions are not presenting a total history, people's expectations can never change and the longer this misrepresentation continues the less likelihood there is of people being taught about a whole, or total, past.3 It is the museum's responsibility to reflect the people of the community it serves.

A plan for the future

The new body now known as Museums Australia Incorporated has put out their resolutions from the 1993 Council of Australian Museums Association Conference. Following are a few brief extracts from this paper which states that Museums Australia recognises the following principles and distinctions:

- That the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the original inhabitants and owners of the lands eventually federated as the Commonwealth of Australia.
- That they be recognised as having unique, distinctive and different cultural traditions ... primary and inalienable rights of ownership.
- Widening access to cultural material.4

Racism and prejudice have played 'hide and seek' throughout history.5 How Australia deals with the past is crucial for its future — for people who make the policies also make the attitudes. Standards must be set but double standards will not work. Government must take the moral lead and ethical theories must be put into practice. In addition to the States' laws which have been implemented, perhaps the Australian Constitution should also voice 'an abhorrence to discriminatory practices.

Mahatma Gandhi's words ‘judge a nation by how it treats its weakest group' still ring true today. When one is threatened, we all are. Tolerance and indifference do not work for they are not valid equivalents for mutual respect.

This article is an edited chapter in Rosemary Kornfeld's yet unpublished book, 'History's Blind Spots'.

endnotes
2 Ibid., p 5.
3 Ibid., pp 7-11.
6 Clyne, pp 152-153.
9 Australian War Memorial Museum Labelling for 'Too Dark For the Lighthorse' exhibition, 1993.
10 McGrath, p 37.