

# Migration, social cohesion and cultural diversity

## Can museums move beyond pluralism?

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The politics surrounding the representation of notions of community in Australian museums and heritage sites has long centred on tensions around the representation of migration history. For, at the heart of differing models of migration history are different understandings of national identity and citizenship. That this is so in Australia should not be surprising. After all, we are a settler culture, born of the British Empire in the first instance and of global twentieth-century history with its patterns of war and massive population movements.

These tensions, have, however, come under increasing pressure, partly as a result of the general turn towards conservatism under the Howard Government (1996–2007) and partly as a part of a more generalised response to the threats posed by terrorism in the post 9/11 period. The trend was quite clear in Howard's attempt to change the way Australians thought about migration in relation to national identity by successfully changing the dominant discourse on Australian culture from one based on an understanding of Australian society as multicultural and premised on social and cultural diversity to one in which that very diversity was subsumed under a singular, Anglo-Celtic understanding of what it was to be Australian. The tone of this turn could easily be seen in an address he gave to the National Press Club in 2006, when he said:

We expect all who come here to make an overriding commitment to Australia, its laws and its democratic values. We expect them to master the common language of English and we will help them to do so.

We want them to learn about our history and heritage. And we expect each unique individual who joins our national journey to enrich it with their loyalty and their patriotism.<sup>1</sup>

Central to this approach was the notion that Australian national identity was based not on a multicultural mosaic fashioned by our various waves of migration but on the centrality of an Anglo-Celtic heritage, which Howard associated with 'the old Australia':

Australia's ethnic diversity is one of the enduring strengths of our nation. Yet our celebration of diversity must not be at the expense of the common

values that bind us together as one people—respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, a commitment to the rule of law, the equality of men and women and a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces tolerance, fair play and compassion for those in need. Nor should it be at the expense of ongoing pride in what are commonly regarded as the values, traditions and accomplishments of the old Australia. A sense of shared values is our social cement.<sup>2</sup>

Howard's attempt to change the way Australians thought about the relationship between migration, cultural diversity and national identity had already resulted in a review of the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in 2003, which criticised that institution for its pluralist approach to the representation of identity. Clearly, understanding the history of the representation of migration in Australian museums is thus not only a window into how we have understood and applied the concept of cultural diversity; it is an opportunity to understand the limits of cultural diversity as a conceptual frame for the relations between heritage and community or between identity and nation. While our government has changed, the relentless questioning of pluralism encountered by those who wanted to pursue a cultural diversity agenda within museums during Howard's government has left us with a problem. How can we represent difference—indeed, argue for its importance—while also recognising the increasing need for social cohesion as a strategy for overcoming terrorism? Is it possible to represent cohesion or work towards achieving it as a social reality without succumbing to the consensual historical narrative favoured by the previous conservative government?

What I want to do, then, is to trace a brief summary of how migration became the main gateway to the representation of cultural diversity in Australia, describe the main forms that this representation took and open up a space for discussion by proposing that the recent conservative climate in Australia has led to an intense questioning of what constitutes Australian identity, a questioning in which models of community defined by notions of cultural diversity have had little space. The consequences of this for the question of who has access to their heritage in public spaces are serious. In order to explore these issues, I will focus on the critique of the NMA's *Horizons Gallery* as well as on the nature of contemporary debate in Australia more widely. I want to end by exploring what other models we might be able to develop to represent relations between heritage and community, which take us beyond pluralism but do not return us to a consensus model of history, in which singularity is privileged over plurality and unity over difference.

The association between migration and national identity was one of the platforms for uniting what used to be six separate colonies into a Federation called Australia. As a number of historians have commented, one of the reasons behind

Federation was a desire to maintain Australia as a white country or, more specifically, a British outpost. Of central importance was the concept of the 'crimson thread of kinship' used by Henry Parkes, the Premier of New South Wales, to overcome the difficulties of arguing at one and the same time for being a nationalist and pro-Empire.<sup>3</sup> Equally important was the emergence of a trade union movement that feared the threat posed by the cheap labour provided by mainly Asian labourers.<sup>4</sup> Hence, one of the first acts of the new Federal Parliament was the *1901 Immigration Act*. This excluded anyone who did not pass a dictation test in a European language dictated by the officer.<sup>5</sup> Originally designed to keep out those of Asian origin, it was also quite successful in making it difficult for southern and eastern European people to migrate. Shortly after, in 1903, the *Naturalisation Act* denied non-European immigrants the right to citizenship, forcing many of them to return home. Together, these formed the basis of what came to be known as the White Australia Policy.

Increasing condemnation of the White Australia Policy by the international community in the period immediately after World War II, together with the post-war recognition that Australia needed to increase its population for both defence and development purposes, led to a change of migration policy at the national level by the Chiefly Government. Slowly, the country began to accept migrants from places other than Britain under individual arrangements made between the Australian Government and the governments of the countries concerned.<sup>6</sup> The dictation test was removed from the statute book in 1958 and, eventually, the White Australia Policy was formally abandoned, by Prime Minister Harold Holt, in 1966. The resulting increase in non-British migration was initially controlled at an ideological level by an assimilation policy in which all migrants had to adapt to Australian ways of life, learn English and keep their ethnic identity within the home. By 1973, however, the Whitlam Government introduced a new concept known as multiculturalism, which 'endorsed diversity rather than singularity as the fabric of nationalism',<sup>7</sup> although it also maintained the idea that the nation was owed one's overall allegiance.

The introduction of multiculturalism as a formal policy was such a radical reinterpretation of Australian society and culture that it required a massive public campaign to re-educate the Anglo majority and those who identified as ethnic to value cultural difference—a point that was recognised by the *Galbally Report* in 1978. Furthermore, as Ian McShane notes, the advent of multiculturalism as a policy happened to coincide with the development of social history and, within that, of migration history as an area of interest for historians.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, governments and museums saw an opportunity. The development of social history as an area for museum collections and exhibitions was also the moment at which museums began to express an interest in forging

links with migrant communities and governments began to see museums as significant agents in their campaign to change public attitudes.

The pivotal point here was the 1978 *Galbally Report*, which was a review of post-arrival programs and services.<sup>9</sup> Commissioned by the Fraser Government, the report argued that more support was needed to enable ethnic communities and cultural agencies to undertake the work of cultural maintenance and preservation. By 1981, the *Edwards Report* into South Australian museums was arguing for 'the need to develop multiculturalism through community education'.<sup>10</sup> One of the outcomes was the establishment of the SA Migration Museum, which became a pioneer in the representation of cultural diversity. Its work became a model for other museums wanting to work with migrant communities and foster acceptance of cultural diversity as central to Australian identity.

Given this educational impulse, it is not surprising that the initial suite of exhibitions was largely celebratory in nature and advanced an understanding of multiculturalism as a melting pot—what Viv Szekeres refers to as the 'liberal tradition' in migration exhibitions<sup>11</sup> and McShane calls the 'enrichment narrative'.<sup>12</sup> Exhibitions in this tradition did this largely by focusing on external markers of ethnicity and interpreting these as adding to the vibrancy of Australian culture. Thus, migrants were, and still are, depicted as revolutionising our food, introducing the cappuccino, improving our sense of style and adding a sense of cosmopolitanism to an otherwise bland Anglo culture. An example was a 1999 exhibition in which Szekeres was herself involved, *Chops and Changes*, the introductory text of which read:

Welcome to our multicultural market packed with foods, people, places and history. We called this exhibition *Chops and Changes* because we wanted to make the point that the Australian diet is no longer dominated by the English-style lamb chop.<sup>13</sup>

In line with the desire to convince the broader Australian population of the benefits of multiculturalism, many of the early exhibitions were also propaganda agencies for government by becoming a venue through which they could disseminate information about migration programs and the need for them—an aim the Department of Immigration supported through substantial sponsorship of museum programs. Exhibitions from this angle largely resulted in a depiction of cultural diversity from a conservative position in which, as Szekeres described it, Australia distributed 'largesse...Migrants are very lucky to be allowed in, especially since they were all so miserable and struggling in their own countries. Migrants should fit in as quickly as possible.'<sup>14</sup>

All in all, these celebratory exhibitions became what we now describe as 'suitcase narrative exhibitions', dealing with such questions as why did the migrants

come, with what and what did they contribute to Australia? As McShane comments, the suitcase narrative is also largely devoted to post-World War II migration and there is, in fact, not much analysis of nineteenth-century migration and its contribution to cultural diversity.<sup>15</sup> When nineteenth-century migration is represented, it is often within maritime museums, where it becomes an opportunity to recreate the interior of the ships, focusing largely on the privations of the passage. The majority of these deal with British migration, although a few displays are beginning to point to the fact that other cultural groups also migrated to Australia at this time. For example, at the Melbourne Immigration Museum, a recreation of the interior of an iron steamship from the late nineteenth century includes extracts from German diaries read out in German.

Nevertheless, the general tendency to focus on post-war migration, while excusable in terms of the impact of that migration period and the sheer numbers involved—about 5.7 million people—does tend to obscure from the field of analysis larger questions such as the impact of colonisation, empire, trade and population policy. The result is that few exhibitions come from what Szekeres calls a ‘radical perspective’, one that questions the social, economic and political structures behind migration patterns and experiences. It also, as McShane<sup>16</sup> points out, makes it easy for the public to assume the existence of a monolithic Australia before this period, making the aim of representing Australia as a multicultural society practically impossible, as migrants are by default categorised as ‘the other’ even if this other is a benign or even a positive force for change. The idea that there is another Australia, which is the normal one, is maintained. From this position, it is almost impossible to critique policies of assimilation and integration or indeed to take a close look at the ways in which migration policy has been aligned with policies on population and cultural identity. These problems become quite clear if we conduct a quick review of some of the major exhibitions dealing with the theme of migration in the past 10 to 15 years.

The Australian National Maritime Museum’s opening exhibition for its *Passengers Gallery* in 1991 used the familiar trope of the passage itself to open up the topic of migrating and the multicultural nature of Australian society. While the use of the trope in itself is not surprising in a maritime museum, the interpretative approach taken is an example of what McShane<sup>17</sup> calls the redemptive or rebirth narrative in which migrants come to a better place and can start again. It is always a positive story that puts Australia in a good light, enacting a deeply held mythology that Australians are fair-minded people who give everyone a ‘fair go’. The theme was particularly strong in the displays that dealt with post-war migration, as revealed by this label, reproduced in the opening catalogue:

### The Migrants

It was the consciousness of inhabiting an underpopulated island, oceans away from familiar cultures, that prompted Anglo-Saxon Australia to open its shores to new waves of migrants. They arrived here in their millions, and the majority came by sea.

For many migrants, this was the opportunity to leave behind persecution or the disruption of war in a variety of 'old countries'. For others, there was the promise of better economic opportunities. Often the belongings they carried were few and simple. In this exhibition they make a poignant commentary on the courage it takes to voyage so far to an unknown land.<sup>18</sup>

The liberal tradition that uses the standard recipe of 'add ethnics and stir', otherwise known as the melting pot or the enriching narrative, is captured by exhibitions that focus on the notion of contribution to Australian society. These are the exhibitions in which cultural diversity comes out as ethnic folklore, riotous colour, fantastic food and 'foreign' religious customs. Such exhibitions serve a double function: they help to maintain, document and preserve ethnic heritages and give ethnic communities a sense of their public value. At the same time, they reinforce the distance between mainstream Australia and ethnic groups. While some of these exhibitions are curated in-house within the social history departments of Australia's large museums or in specialised migration museums, many also come about through the community gallery movement in which small spaces within mainstream museums are 'given' over to communities for the purposes of self-representation within the overall educational aim of 'teaching' cultural diversity. A recent example from 2007 is the *Beyond the Postcard Image* exhibition, which celebrated the Rodriguan and Mauritian communities in Victoria. The blurb for the exhibition read:

#### Beyond the Postcard Image

##### Victoria's Rodriguans and Mauritians

People from Mauritius and Rodrigues—two small and exotic but relatively unknown Indian Ocean islands—have established themselves as a strong and vibrant community in Victoria.

This new exhibition reveals that beyond the picture-postcard tropical island heritage, the Mauritian and Rodriguan community is innately diverse—in religious, folkloric and culinary traditions.

Another example comes from the Museum of the Riverina's exhibition *From all Four Corners: Stories of migration to Wagga Wagga*, which was developed as part of a multicultural festival in Wagga Wagga for the winter of 2007. The exhibition continues to have an afterlife as an online resource. *From all Four Corners*

continues the enriching tradition by embedding all of its stories of migration within a celebratory narrative in which the newcomers make good by becoming 'valued community members' and contributing to a multicultural mosaic. Their achievements are described by the standard approach to valuing their ethnic differences around food, customs and religion while also pointing out their successful integration in terms of work and family life. Thus, an introductory label on the web version of the exhibition explains that the migrants represented in the exhibition

have survived. They have married, had children, gone to school, studied, bought homes, found employment, set up businesses, formed clubs, established a social life, shared their customs, traditions and cooking, practised their religion, and became valued community members.<sup>19</sup>

This exhibition does, however, overcome some of the limitations identified by McShane in the enriching narrative. In particular, the definition of who is a migrant is quite broad, ranging from a nineteenth-century soldier settler to a recent arrival from Sierra Leone. Its limitation, from the point of view of a 'critical' perspective on migration, is that it remains within the frame of multiculturalism as a mosaic by focusing on individual ethnicities rather than on the kind of cross-cultural contact that really produces multicultural societies. Thus, in an attempt to keep the exhibition continuing, the exhibition site asks viewers from Wagga Wagga to share their migrant stories by answering such questions as 'What was life like in your country of origin? How did you come to Australia? Where is home to you?'<sup>20</sup> Such questions, while doing a good job in terms of catering to the social inclusion agenda, do little to foster social cohesion because they do not allow a space for representing contact across cultures and groups.

While it is easy to point to the simplified, celebratory narratives that a focus on multiculturalism has generated, there are also a significant number of exhibitions that offer more. There are examples of exhibitions that blend an enrichment narrative with a more nuanced look at the history of cultural diversity in Australia and its relationship to various governmental policies on migration. Quite a few of these exhibitions made attempts to counter the dominant narrative of pre-World War II Australia as monocultural, engaged in a critique of migration policy, and explored the structural reasons for migration.

A very early example that managed to introduce some reflective moments was one of the opening exhibitions at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. Social history was a new development at this museum and very much part of its redevelopment in time for the Bicentenary in 1988. As part of the Social History Department's exhibitions, one gallery was devoted to the theme of 'Australian communities'. In this context, the gallery dealt with post-settlement Indigenous history and issues of cultural diversity. This made it one of the earliest attempts

to negotiate the place of Indigenous communities within the rubric of cultural diversity—something that was of obvious political sensitivity. The interesting thing is that this gallery looked at Australian history from the perspective of migration, arguing that there had always been an element of cultural diversity to Australian society. Thus, settlers were called migrants, Irish and Anglo settlers were pointed to as well as the Chinese, Italians, Greeks and Germans. A critical element was introduced with a critique of the White Australia Policy and assimilation—which one would expect from an agency of government promoting multiculturalism. Emphasis was also placed on discussing assisted-passage schemes as well as those that took refugees. As such, those from a British background were also represented as migrants and part of Australia's ethnic mix. This was important as it represented an important point of departure from the previous celebratory model in which ethnicity was not something that marked the dominant Anglo-Celtic majority. Here, perhaps for the first time, there was a sense in which the community was defined by cultural diversity. In other words, cultural diversity was the starting point rather than something that was added like icing on the top. The need to teach cultural diversity, however, was still keenly felt, particularly in relations with Asian groups, as the following quotation from a pamphlet accompanying the exhibition revealed:

Regrettably, well-entrenched negative attitudes towards Asians, left over from the 1800s and World War II, still exist. Despite the rich contribution of Asian immigrants, some parts of the Australian community continue to express resentment and hostility towards them.<sup>21</sup>

Another particularly impressive exhibition was *Sweet and Sour: Experiences of Chinese families in the Northern Territory* by the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery in association with the Chung Wah Association in 1997.<sup>22</sup> The exhibition was remarkable on three counts. First, it provided a history of the extensive presence of people of Chinese descent since the 1870s; second, it balanced an explicit narrative of celebration and continuity with a reflective look at the 'sour' aspects of the Chinese community's experience by looking at the impact of the White Australia and assimilationist policies; and third, it provided a structural context for Chinese migration into the area by looking at the history of trade and industry. The exhibition possessed a rare depth and historical dimension to its analysis of multiculturalism in the Northern Territory, using the Chinese community as a case study. In the process, it showed how an 'enriching' narrative did not have to exclude a more critical or reflective perspective. Perhaps one of the lessons that can be drawn from this exhibition is that the representation of cultural diversity through migration exhibitions should include relations between those that come and those that are already here—in other words, be attentive to the dialogue that occurs between groups. In that respect, an exhibition such as *Chops and Changes* offers more than initially



meets the eye as its theme allows for a comparative perspective across groups, including the Anglo majority. The limitation is that it is done within the frame of ‘teaching multiculturalism’—a frame that seems to make it almost impossible to ‘other’ the majority, or at least put it on an equal footing.

The trend to develop more exploratory and insightful exhibitions could perhaps be seen as culminating in certain aspects of the *Horizons: The peopling of Australia since 1788 Gallery* at the NMA, which opened in 2001. Divided into five themes—Keeping Guard, Marketing Migrants, Coming to Work, Prisons Without Walls and The Peopling of Australia Since 1788—this exhibition attempted to look at migration from a more structural perspective, looking in particular at the ways in which immigration policy regulated who was allowed to come in and out. While the National Collection was partial in its collection of ethnic material culture, having collected much that could be described as belonging to the ‘suitcase’ narrative, an attempt was made to broaden the context, as this excerpt from the introductory text to the Keeping Guard theme illustrates:

Australia’s population has been shaped by many things. But one of the most important forces has been the role government has played in deciding who and what is allowed into the country.

*Horizons* looked at three types of immigration regulation—restriction, quarantine and censorship—and at how each impacted on the other. It also reminded us of how official decisions can affect individual lives. Display items such as the handprint of a prohibited individual and the story of Eugene Goossens told of a more suspicious past that was peppered with uncertainty and fear. As we shall see, the attempt was brave for, by this point in Australia’s recent history, public debate was turning against multiculturalism and the values of cultural diversity.

While the gallery contained examples of the enriching and rebirth narratives by including individual migrant stories, which highlighted the appalling conditions that were left behind and stories of being better off in their new country, these were done analytically with an eye to showing how this narrative was an effect of government propaganda. To show the other side of the story, there were also examples that focused on the difficulties of settling into a new country. In particular, the mythology of a ‘fair go’ was placed under a question mark with examples of highly qualified people who could never practice their profession again through lack of official recognition of degrees. I remember the story of Ilija Brakmanis, a Latvian-trained dentist whose professional equipment sat idle for many years. Eventually, after many years working as a domestic cleaner, Brakmanis was allowed a limited practice in Canberra. Proof that she had never expected to encounter problems in practising in Australia is given through the presence of an English translation of her qualifications, done while she was still in a displaced person’s camp in Germany. Audiences were thus encouraged to think about who was allowed to come and why, how that question

had changed over time and, just as importantly, how our reception of migrants also told a story about our own cultural assumptions about those who were different from us.

The issue was of particular salience at the time, as Australia was experiencing a new wave of 'boat people' attempting to seek asylum without going through the Immigration Department before getting to Australia. Public debate about the refugee issue was mounting and a number of museums attempted to participate through exhibitions that explored the world of refugees. *Survivors of Torture and Trauma*, for example, was an exhibition at the Migration Museum in Adelaide, held between 6 September and 30 November 2001. The museum explained its role thus:

The exhibition provided a brief overview of survivors, people who have come to South Australia, overcoming incredibly difficult and often traumatic experiences to attempt to build new lives here. The exhibition aimed to help people understand the experience of survivors, who have often come as refugees and faced difficulties in Australia also. It included personal stories as well as information on the processes refugees go through in order to come here.<sup>23</sup>

Given the increasingly strident tone of public debate at the national level against refugees, this was already a brave exhibition, which was clearly trying to enter the debate.

As it happens, neither the NMA nor the Migration Museum could have predicted two major events: 9/11 and the Tampa incident. Both were to make it increasingly harder to argue for leniency and sympathy for refugees as the fear that they might be terrorists grew apace. As the Western world geared up for 'the war on terrorism', disaster also struck off the Australian coast. An Indonesian boat, *KM Palapa I*, laden with refugees from the Taliban, was attempting to make it to Christmas Island in Australian waters. Its engine stopped working. One boat had already sailed by ignoring them and 'numerous Australian planes had circled overhead but left them to wallow in the sea' as the Australian Government attempted to avoid responsibility and demanded that the Indonesian Government both rescue the asylum-seekers and take them back to Indonesia.<sup>24</sup> When this policy came to naught, the government eventually put out a rescue call, which the *Tampa*, a Norwegian cargo ship, took up. The intention, however, was still to stop these people from arriving on Australian territory, which was already over capacity with asylum-seekers. The Australian Government refused to allow the *Tampa* into an Australian port. Eventually, an arrangement was brokered with New Zealand and the Pacific island of Nauru, which took in the refugees so that they could apply to come to Australia from outside the country. Despite furore from the left, the electorate supported the government's stance or, at least, did not allow itself to be too bothered by the situation, as the government

was returned barely two months after what many regarded as one of Australia's worst public relations disasters. No doubt 9/11, which occurred about the same time, did much to help the government's stance, as public fear ran high. The result was a public culture in which difference became a problem not a virtue, particularly in relations between Muslim and Anglo-Australians.

Emboldened by its electoral success, the government continued to raise the debate between integration and social cohesion on the one hand and cultural diversity on the other even further, with Muslim communities often being made the scapegoat. We can see this if we trace the Prime Minister's discourse on the balance between cultural diversity and national identity.

The 2001 Australia Day address, just before the NMA opened and before either the Tampa or 9/11, gives a sense of the way things were going, for the focus was already on social cohesion:

Our social cohesion is a priceless asset. It will underpin the future progress and harmony of our nation. For this very reason we have an obligation to seek out and address those flaws in our society which threaten our community's cohesion.<sup>25</sup>

By 3 October 2003, at the official launch of the Moreton 2004 Community Achievement Awards at Macgregor State School in Brisbane, when public angst was high over perceptions that the Muslim community was not fitting in, Howard stated:

We don't ask them to forget the country of their birth, nobody should be asked to do that. But we do, of course, ask that people having come to this country from all parts of the world that they are received into our community as equals. The only requirement of a patriotic Australian is a total commitment to this country and that applies whether you were born here or whether you came from another country and you embrace it as your own.<sup>26</sup>

The need to soften the Islamic community's practice of difference was clearly expressed in multiple radio interviews, of which the first example came just before the Cronulla riots in 2006:

We want people when they come to Australia to adopt Australian ways, we don't ask them to forget the countries of their birth, we respect all religious points of view and people are entitled to practice them. But there are certain things that are not part of the Australian mainstream and I've identified two in particular in relation to a section of the Islamic Population.<sup>27</sup>

In time, his position solidified, and he became strident in his support of the notion that a nation could be based on only one culture:

We are tolerant to people of different backgrounds but over the years at its zenith, the more zealous multiculturalism basically said that this country should be a federation of cultures. You can't have a nation with a federation of cultures. You can have a nation where a whole variety of cultures influence and mould and change and blend in with the mainstream culture...you have to recognise that there is a core set of values in this country.<sup>28</sup>

And, finally, on the question of multiculturalism and its relevance for contemporary Australian identity:

If multiculturalism simply means that we respect everybody, we want everybody to be an Australian first, second and third, but we also understand that people retain affections for their original cultures and countries, and that's perfectly normal and I think we enjoy it. And we want those other cultures to be part of our mainstream culture and we welcome that. Now, if it means that we're all for it. If it means that we're going to encourage people to maintain their differences and that basically we have an attitude that well all cultures are equal, all cultures are the same, then I don't think people feel comfortable with that.<sup>29</sup>

Many people on the left now think that the terms 'social cohesion' or 'integration' are just new words for the old policy of assimilation. It is very clear from the former Prime Minister's public discourse that he wanted to make Anglo-Australian values the core of Australian identity in what was very clearly a direct challenge to the notion that cultural diversity lay at the heart of Australian identity. For Howard, there was a mainstream, dominant Australian identity and cultural diversity, to the extent that it was supported, was the icing on the cake—but not the cake itself.

If we go back to the NMA, then, it is quite clear why that museum sailed into troubled waters as soon as it opened its doors in March 2001. At that stage, conservatives were angry at what they described as black-armband history, claiming that the NMA made Australians feel bad about themselves. Many argued that the museum satirised everyday life and poked fun at the ordinary Australian.<sup>30</sup> The government responded by commissioning a review, which reported its findings in 2003. By then, what came through was not so much an attack on revisionist history—indeed, the gallery that dealt with Aboriginal Australia was, on the whole, highly commended. Instead, it was an attack on pluralism—that is, on the way the NMA dealt with the themes of cultural diversity. *Horizons* was one of two galleries that came in for especially heavy criticism. The other was *Nation*. Reading the document now, after reminding myself of Howard's public pronouncements on the issue of cultural diversity versus cohesion, I am struck by how often the reviewers point to the need for an 'integrated narrative', for a 'single' story to be told, preferably in chronological

order and most of it celebratory. In their recommendations, migration almost disappears as a theme for display let alone a theme worthy of an entire gallery. The theme of cultural diversity is applauded only when it does not deal directly with the issue of immigration—as in the *Eternity Gallery*, which offers individual Australian stories up as a microcosm of the nation organised around seven different human passions. Within a rotating menu of stories, there are Australians of various ethnic backgrounds, differing sexualities, both genders, rural and urban, professional and working class.

The real purpose of the review is very much an attack on pluralism. This is signalled in the second chapter, which offers some reflections on the nature of Australian history and the vision that established the criteria for the review. Thus, in acknowledging the need to give some sense of the diversity of everyday life in Australia, the reviewers also pointed to the ‘risk...of presenting an assembly of ill-coordinated fragments, merely serving to confuse the visitor’.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, they argued against Graeme Davison, one of Australia’s most respected public historians on Australian history, who had already gone in to bat for the museum’s understanding of cultural diversity a number of times. Davison had argued in a submission to the review that:

Rather than suppressing difference by imposing a single authorial voice, or brokering an institutional consensus, the NMA might better begin with the assumption that the imagined community we call the nation is by its very nature plural and in flux. In practice the degree of difference should not be exaggerated; there are many topics of high interest on which there is a substantial consensus of opinion. A national museum might then expect to play host to several interpretations of the national past, stirringly patriotic as well as critical, educationally demanding as well as entertaining.<sup>32</sup>

The panel went to great lengths to disagree with Davison’s opinion, explaining that they were ‘inclined to read more consensus than plurality at the core of the national collective conscience’. In particular, they wanted to focus on continuities rather than flux. They claimed this difference in approach was one only of emphasis and would not lead to a ‘notably different series of judgements in reviewing the NMA’.<sup>33</sup> The difference, however, was clearly visible both in their criteria for judging the museum, which was developed by the panel rather than given to them, and in their comments on the *Horizons Gallery*. Thus, for the panel, criterion number one was the requirement for the NMA to ‘[t]ell the Australian story—and by means of compelling narratives’.<sup>34</sup> The second was to

[p]resent the primary themes and narratives of Australia since the arrival of the British, through the building of the nation to the country’s place in the contemporary world. This includes evoking national character

traits; detailing exemplary individual, group and institutional achievements; and charting the singular qualities of the nation.<sup>35</sup>

Against these two first criteria, *Horizons* was judged as suffering from 'some confusion of identity', with the panel recommending it be scrapped and refocused more 'explicitly on the European discovery-until-Federation period'.<sup>36</sup> The theme of peopling Australia, they felt, could be dealt with in vignettes in other galleries and in temporary exhibitions. Their main critique of *Horizons* was that it failed to project 'exemplary individual, group and institutional achievements'.<sup>37</sup> It is hard not to read this as a criticism of the fact that the gallery failed to present the story of migration as either the enriching or the rebirth narrative. They were particularly critical of the attempt to conscript convict history to the theme of migration, clearly expecting the introduction of convicts to lead to a very different narrative about the nation—one based on progress from small beginnings. The significance of the issues at hand was of sufficient importance for one member of the review panel to insist on a 'minority opinion' disclosure in which he argued against a chronological frame for the representation of Australian history and supporting the peopling Australia theme as important enough to have a gallery in its own right.<sup>38</sup>

Given these criticisms, one could take the revamping of the *Horizons Gallery* into *Australian Journeys*, which opened in January 2009, as an attempt to deal with the problem of the politics of narrative by evading it altogether. Instead of presenting a narrative about migration in Australia, either from an enriching or a critical perspective, the present gallery evades the question by not engaging with the history of migration at all. Instead, it opts for the safer landscape of presenting vignettes of cultural exchanges, the flow of ideas and goods to and from Australia via the journeys of those who came here as well as those who went overseas. While the choice of some of the objects and stories might be informed by themes in migration history—the continuity of ethnic cultural practices, the difficulties experienced by migrants and the exchange of goods and ideas being some of them—these frames are not made explicit. Nor are the stories linked to the historical context that surrounds them. As Linda Young<sup>39</sup> comments, this approach results in 'a beautifully contrived beach decked with stories' but it does nothing to provide a 'bigger account', a frame through which one can understand the global movement of people and its impact on particular national histories. Obscured from view are the policy frameworks, the political contexts and the national histories that give rise to the journeys undertaken by migrants and travellers more generally. Difference is rendered safe, much in the same way that it was in the *Eternity Gallery*—through the attraction of personal stories.

It would be easy to assume that the problem is particularly acute at the NMA and that, somehow, this museum appears to find it difficult to engage in strong

narratives. In comparison, for example, it would seem that the Migration Museum in Melbourne is strengthening its critical narratives. In its opening exhibitions, also in 2001, for example, it managed to comment on public attitudes towards refugees through a label about asylum-seekers:

Asylum seekers are refugees, seeking new countries in which to settle. Australia provides protection for asylum seekers under its Humanitarian Program.

It is not illegal to seek asylum in Australia. It is a basic human right, accepted by all signatories, including Australia, to the 1951 UN Convention and 1967 UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

And then underneath this heading and label:

#### Illegal Immigrants

Illegal Immigrants are people who have not met any legal requirements for visiting or migrating to Australia. This includes thousands of people who overstay their visas, many from Britain and the United States. Overstayers outnumber asylum seekers by ten to one.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, this was part of an attempt to correct some of the misunderstandings that had arisen in the public imagination in response to contemporary debates and political rhetoric.

Even stronger is an interactive touch screen in which visitors get to vote on whether someone should be allowed to come into Australia or not and what the official decision at the time was. Inevitably, making decisions on present-day values rather than through the White Australia Policy or even the post-war migration policy, the gulf between past and present humanitarian values shines through. What is most harrowing is to watch the expressions of suffering on people's faces when they are not a straightforward case. As the audience, you literally squirm in your seat, uncomfortable at the lack of imagination and sympathy on the part of the officials. And even more interesting is the fact that this booth is always in use and it generates discussion between strangers about what is happening on screen and what people are feeling about it.

Unlike the NMA, the Migration Museum, rather than having to back down from this approach, is in fact strengthening its critical approach by developing a new suite of exhibitions that engage with racism. The question thus remains, why is it so difficult for a museum like the NMA to engage with strong narratives—either pluralist or consensual? Perhaps the answer lies in the way these two positions have become politicised so that they have come to represent liberal and conservative in ways that a national museum cannot possibly navigate. Unable to take either political position, it seeks refuge in no narrative at all. The battle lines are, however, also unhelpful at a more general level. They do not

allow those on the pluralist side to deal with the fact that social cohesion, and not just social inclusion, is also necessary. On the other hand, those on the side of consensus push too stridently for integration, for the single narrative from within the one perspective. We need to get away from viewing the choices as an either/or. How do we do this?

Somehow we need to get to a point where we can talk about shared experiences as well as differences of experience. This, I suggest, is possible only by finding ways in which elements within an exhibition are clearly in conversation with one another as well as with audiences. Rather than 'teaching' diversity, exhibitions need to enact it. Here, I want to advance two ways of going about this. The first is to find themes and places that contain within them a variety of experiences. Diversity in this scenario is not something that is outside the mainstream, but is something within it. In other words, normative narratives within a nation's historiography can be opened from the inside out. All one has to do is look at how people have rubbed shoulders with one another, to look at everyday life and how it is experienced. Attention to the differing experiences of class, race, gender and location would continue; but rather than using these categories separately, they would be in dialogue with one another by virtue of their place within a shared historiographical theme or a geographical location. The second, and ideally related, strategy is to find ways in which the audience is also brought into the dialogue. Of central importance here is the use of affect as an interpretative strategy. Affect works through evoking, moving or touching the viewer, producing a visceral response that promotes empathy rather than just 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. As bell hooks puts it, such strategies have the capacity to bring subjects and listeners together into the same territory and on the same footing.<sup>41</sup>

The potential of this approach is exemplified by a recent exhibition called *Migration Memories*. Curated in situ at Robinvale and at Lightning Ridge by Mary Hutchison before being combined in a temporary exhibition at the NMA, this exhibition used, among its strategies, a complex approach to sound to emphasise two things. The first was to build a sense of place in which diversity was the norm rather than something layered on top of an original community. The second was to use the layers of sound to create a space in which the viewer/listener was embedded in this diversity and hence part of it.

While the voices within the exhibition emanated from individual experiences and they ranged across time, ethnicity, age and gender, they were not there as representatives of particular ethnic groups but as people with particular stories to tell. Moreover, unlike conventional sound bites from oral histories, the sounds or stories audiences hear in this exhibition retain the quality of a conversation;



there is already a listener in the recording whose presence is allowed to shine through. These conversations also occur in multiple languages and the work involved in translation is embedded in them. The effect of this is to make translation an everyday activity, not something that is outside of it. The effect is a soundscape in which a sense of place defined by a diversity of experiences is evoked through the conversations that take place as part of its everyday life—conversations that take place in multiple languages in which English is only one among many. It is therefore a conversation in which audiences can imaginatively also participate. The effect is to give agency to those whose voices we are hearing as well as to those who are hearing them. In other words, there is a dialogue between them.

In conclusion, it seems to me that there are ways in which the use of personal stories can be used to create a meaningful patchwork, which does not degenerate either into a series of unconnected vignettes or into a narrative that simply supports a simplistic understanding of diversity in which there is a clear distinction between those who simply add colour and interest and those who are ‘normal’ and whom we should all aspire to be like. The real need to learn how to live together demands more than either a consensual or a pluralistic approach to representation.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Howard, John 2006, *A sense of balance: the Australian achievement in 2006*, Address to the National Press Club by the Prime Minister of Australia, Great Hall, Parliament House, 25 January 2006, viewed 21 February 2007, <<http://www.pm.gov.au/media/speech/2006/speech1754.cfm>>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Irving, Helen 1999, *To Constitute a Nation. A cultural history of Australia's constitution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 29; Hirst, John 1998, ‘Federation’, in G. Davison, J. Hirst and S. Macintyre (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p. 243.

<sup>4</sup> See Jupp, James 1991, ‘Immigration’, in David Walker (series ed.), *Australian Retrospectives*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, pp. 46–51.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 46–51.

<sup>6</sup> For a list of dates and countries, see *ibid.*, pp. 76–7.

<sup>7</sup> McShane, Ian 2001, ‘Challenging or conventional? Migration history in Australian museums’, in Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner (eds), *National Museums, Negotiating Histories, Conference Proceedings*, National Museum of Australia/Centre for Cross-Cultural Research/Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, Canberra, p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Galbally, Frank 1978, *Review of Post-Arrival Programs and Services to Migrants*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra; cited in *ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards, Robert 1981, *Final Report on Museum Policy and Development in South Australia*; cited in McShane, ‘Challenging or conventional?’, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Skezkeres, Viv 1995, ‘A place for all of us’, *Public History Review*, vol. 4, p. 61–2.

<sup>12</sup> McShane, ‘Challenging or conventional?’, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> *Chops and Changes*, Migration Museum, South Australia, exhibited in Canberra, 1999. Also cited in McShane, ‘Challenging or conventional?’, p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> Skezkeres, ‘A place for all of us’, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> McShane, ‘Challenging or conventional?’, p. 125.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Australian National Maritime Museum 1992, *Guide to the Australian National Maritime Museum*, Panda Books for the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Museum of the Riverina 2009, 'Welcome page', *From all Four Corners: Stories of migration to Wagga Wagga*, viewed 27 April 2009, <<http://203.38.125.68/fourcorners/Welcome.html>>

<sup>20</sup> Museum of the Riverina 2009, 'Share your migration story', *From all Four Corners: Stories of migration to Wagga Wagga*, viewed 27 April 2009, <<http://203.38.125.68/fourcorners/Share.html>>

<sup>21</sup> Douglas, Louise 1991, 'Australian communities', Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

<sup>22</sup> See this exhibition's catalogue: Dimond, Glenys (ed.) 1996, *Sweet and Sour: Experiences of Chinese families in the Northern Territory*, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin.

<sup>23</sup> See

<[http://www.history.sa.gov.au/migration/galleries\\_programs/community\\_access\\_gallery/survivors.htmweb](http://www.history.sa.gov.au/migration/galleries_programs/community_access_gallery/survivors.htmweb)> (viewed 21 February 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Marr, David and Wilkinson, Marian 2003, *Dark Victory*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Howard, John 2001, Australia Day address by the Prime Minister of Australia, 25 January 2001, viewed 21 February 2007, <<http://www.pm.gov.au/media/speech/2001/speech670.cfm>>

<sup>26</sup> Howard, John 2003, Official launch of the Moreton 2004 Community Achievement Awards, 3 October 2003, Macgregor State School, Brisbane, viewed 21 February 2007, <<http://www.pm.gov.au/media/speech/2003/speech513.cfm>>

<sup>27</sup> Howard, John 2006, Doorstop interview, 20 February 2006, Hilton Hotel, Sydney, viewed 21 February 2007, <<http://www.pm.gov.au/media/interview/2006/Interview1779.cfm>>

<sup>28</sup> Howard, John 2006, Interview with Neil Mitchell, Radio 3AW, Melbourne, 24 February 2006, viewed 21 February 2007, <<http://www.pm.gov.au/media/interview/2006/Interview1788.cfm>>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of this, see Witcomb, Andrea 2006, 'How style came to matter: do we need to move beyond the politics of representation', in Chris Healy and Andrea Witcomb (eds), *South Pacific Museums: Experiments in culture*, Monash University E-Press, Melbourne, pp. 21.1.16 (DOI:10.2104/spm06021).

<sup>31</sup> Commonwealth of Australia 2003, *Review of the National Museum of Australia, Its Exhibitions and Public Programs*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p. 7, <[http://www.nma.gov.au/shared/libraries/attachments/review/review\\_report\\_20030715/files/552/ReviewReport20030715.pdf](http://www.nma.gov.au/shared/libraries/attachments/review/review_report_20030715/files/552/ReviewReport20030715.pdf)>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Young, Linda 2009, 'Review of Australian Journeys', *reCollections. Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, vol. 4, no. 1, <[http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol\\_4\\_no1/exhibition\\_reviews/australian\\_journal](http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_4_no1/exhibition_reviews/australian_journal)>

<sup>40</sup> These label quotations are taken from the *Getting In* exhibition at the Migration Museum in Melbourne as they were in March 2007.

<sup>41</sup> hooks, bell 1991, 'Narratives of struggle', in Philomena Mariani (ed.), *Critical Fictions: The politics of imaginative writing*, Bay Press, Seattle, pp. 57–8.