

The museum, democracy and domesticity: who's in whose web?

Abstract:

Many museums are increasingly using the world-wide-web to work with communities and to enhance their accessibility and relevance. The world-wide-web becomes a conduit not just for the museums to access communities, but enables communities to engage with museums in new, and potentially more democratic, ways. Working amongst communities is central to the role of the NSW Migration Heritage Centre of NSW. They are also working with institutions of varying scales to produce exhibitions. One of the ways this organization works is on-line, producing both content for on-line exhibitions not available elsewhere and original contextual material for cultural heritage collections. The NSW Migration Heritage Centre uses the site of the home, by way of home computers, as the primary point of delivery for the exhibition and contextual material. This paper considers if, and how, this mode of working amongst communities and across museums brings 'the public museum' closer to its stated aims in relation to democracy.

Introduction:

The web, as the title of our paper infers, is a tricky thing. While technical advances in this area are extraordinary, how has the world-wide-web changed the way we understand the terms community, audience or public? Our paper is not so much about the technical aspects of the web, but about a key idea that inspires or motivates us to engage with people using the web. Certain assumptions are present in recent museum studies literature about the web and museums: that the web somehow enables a greater coverage than a museum in its material form, that people can be 'trapped' in the web (tricked), framed within it or if we use it as a verb, the web—as in to cover—is potentially borderless.

The web can appear to be indiscriminate, open to all and the answer to problems about access and representation in the museum. Indeed, the web can appear as the panacea, the basis upon which museums can ultimately claim to be democratic. But how does the web render museums more democratic and cultural heritage more participatory? How does the web *really* affect our understanding of community in the museum, collections and

heritage sectors? And how does the web enable greater democratic potential for museums to contribute to sustainable community networks?

This paper is about the idea of community that underpins the work, not only of the NSW Migration Heritage Centre (MHC), but of museums generally. What is at stake here is how museums recognise communities and their forms of cultural practices, without laying claim to them. Inclusion and collaboration is not simply understood as community developing a competency dealing with the world of museums. What we see with the MHC *Belongings*¹ research project and on-line exhibition is how the MHC works with the idea of community in a way that enables them to collaborate with communities. They resist the temptation to use the web as an unmediated forum, a dumping ground for people's stories and scanned photos, or an open cabinet of curiosities universalising people's cultural heritage—being all things to all people. The MHC's on-line *Belongings* exhibition, logistically, is not always accessible to all communities and cannot record every migration story in NSW. The limiting and liberating effects of working with the idea of community underpinning their web presence is worth examining. Before doing so, we shall briefly outline the history of the MHC.

Background to the MHC

The former NSW Premier Bob Carr announced the establishment of the MHC in July 1997. In 1998 the NSW Government set up a high level project team to develop the MHC. Its purpose was to research and promote the contribution made by immigrants to the State and the nation's life. The Centre was, according to then NSW Ministry for the Arts, to reach beyond the notion of a static "museum of immigration" to harness resources within the broadest range of Government agencies.² The Centre was also a response to concern that many ethnic communities felt ignored in the process of cultural decision making, heritage identification and assessment and that many communities felt there was a lack of two-way communication between them and those who have traditionally been seen as the adjudicators and protectors of our cultural heritage. A major redevelopment of the Centre's website was launched in May 2006 with aims to be as accessible as possible, within the limits of current available network technology, to all people in NSW with internet, including people in rural and regional areas.³

The MHC's redeveloped website fulfills the NSW Government's vision for a museum without walls and an on-line heritage centre. It was conceived by the Centre to showcase

the cultural diversity of the people of New South Wales and their heritage legacy. It helps families pass stories on to the present generation. The Centre brokers and initiates a diverse range of heritage partnership projects across Sydney and rural and regional NSW to help communities identify and conserve migration heritage places and collections and associated memories.

Working amongst communities is central to the heritage collection, place identification and preservation role of the MHC. Heritage field research methods and regional thematic studies are used. Kylie Winkworth describes thematic heritage studies:

as a survey and comparative assessment of heritage items related to a particular historic theme or subject. It is designed to develop an understanding of the significant objects, collections or heritage items associated with the theme. It helps museums to identify and document significant objects, identify conservation needs and improve the interpretation of objects and the theme.

A thematic study might cover an industry like timber or wheat, certain categories of objects such as quilts or colonial furniture, a trade like blacksmithing, a region or an aspect of daily life.⁴

The identification and documentation of movable heritage then culminates in both three dimensional and on-line exhibitions produced in partnership with historical societies and local government organisations, including regional museums. Unlike the centralised and three dimensional ‘communities gallery’ model of a bricks and mortar museum, the Centre’s research primarily culminates in on-line content, producing ‘e-exhibitions’ often not viewable in museum spaces or galleries elsewhere. When the Centre produces three dimensional versions of the exhibitions, these are not centralised in a Sydney museum but usually displayed in the rural and regional town where the community lives and an on-line version mediates the exhibition to the outside world. Qualified or volunteer local curators (untrained) produce the exhibitions, which are pitched to a local community audience who can identify with familiar local names and identities, places and stories. The collections remain in the region and within the community where they have principal cultural heritage significance including historic associations and intangible heritage values. As outlined above, the emphasis is on thematic heritage study processes and reciprocity, building community capacity for identifying, preserving and interpreting local heritage collections.

The MHC uses the site of the home, by way of home computers, as both the primary point of delivery for the exhibitions to audiences and in the *Belongings* on-line exhibition, as a place to document *in situ* personal and family owned heritage collections and

showcase these to the outside world. We now consider if, and how, this model of working amongst communities in the home and across museums brings ‘the public museum’ closer to its stated aims in relation to democracy. We examine how culturally appropriate heritage practices foster community participation in heritage identification, preservation and interpretation of *in situ* personal and family owned collections.

The Belongings Project

In 2006 the NSW Migration Heritage Centre launched an on-line exhibition entitled *Belongings* to document privately and family owned heritage collections. Its inspiration was the community generated on-line exhibition the National Women’s Quilt Register, an online exhibition and resource researched by volunteers co-ordinated by the Pioneer Women’s Hut, Tumbarumba in NSW.⁵ *Belongings* features first person migration memories and personal mementos and photographs of former migrants who arrived in Australia after the Second World War between the years 1946 and 1974.⁶ The project was developed by John Petersen of the MHC with input from heritage consultants Kylie Winkworth and Meredith Walker, Wendy Hucker of the National Women’s Quilt Register, and historian Mary Ann Hamilton. It was co-ordinated by Andrea Fernandes MHC Project Coordinator, who developed the project’s process of engagement with communities through local government and historical society partnerships. The Centre uses local community media and local government networks such as the Mayor’s Column in local newspapers to alert individuals and communities about their work and opportunities to participate in the *Belongings* project. It is a process of self-identification where people or representatives of communities contact the MHC or a project partner in their local area. Andrea Fernandes conducts home interviews or supervises project researchers in different local government areas. Former migrants are interviewed in their homes and asked a short set of questions for consistency across the oral testimonies and to map key places, dates and events associated with their journey and settlement. The former migrants are asked to suggest family owned migration objects that describe aspects of their personal migration and settlement experiences. They are photographed with their objects and their memories of these are recorded. The lengthy sign-off period for the interviewees ensures that they are comfortable with the forum in which their personal stories will be communicated, beyond the familial context. *Belongings* also includes a section ‘Caring For Belongings’, providing advice on how to record migration stories and conserve and store personal mementos in the home.

Migration memories—and indeed associated material culture and significant places—are either poorly represented or ignored by many historians as sources of evidence in administrative histories of migration and settlement. As well as providing insiders’ views of living conditions, memories - and indeed personal mementos, where they exist - have potential to contest government records of migrant centre management. They can add a human perspective to our understanding of regional histories and heritage places, including landscapes, buildings, rooms and spaces.

Former migrants generally identify with their cultural group, with other people who migrated from their own region, with people who travelled on board the same ship or as members of a community who have shared a distinctive or life-changing experience, perhaps as Holocaust Survivors or Ten Pound Poms. In addition to researching these important communities, historians and heritage practitioners often group former migrants as being part of the Post-Second World War migration wave in Australian history. Through participation in the *Belongings* web exhibition, the experiences of former migrants are not only validated and valued but they form a virtual community of people as part of this migration wave even though their homes are in different local government areas across NSW and they are from different cultural groups.

Belongings partnerships are usually brokered in local government areas near where post-Second World War migrant centres were located, accommodating and settling migrants and supplying labour to local industries. There were over 35 across NSW.⁷ In each participating local government area, advertisements calling for *Belongings* participants describe the project, its interest in ‘stories of local migrants in relation to their own memorabilia, keepsake or belonging’ in the decades after the Second World War. People are invited to contact a project researcher if they ‘would like to participate’ and ‘talk to us about your personal belonging’ and interviewers follow up leads in the person’s home.⁸ Some *Belongings* partnerships are established with cultural groups and ethnic museums, like the Sydney Jewish Museum or Leeton Italian Historical Society, which maintain close relationships and research interests with particular cultural groups.

Post-Second World War migrants are ageing and it is important to record their experiences before it is too late. Personal mementos from migration journeys help people remember experiences of everyday life that might otherwise have been forgotten. Mementos should be prized family heirlooms handed down from one generation to

another, like photo albums. Part of the rationale of *Belongings* is to raise the status of privately owned migration collections within families and communities. The MHC is in the process of learning from individuals and communities about the nature of these heritage collections. It is keen to raise the status of migration collections: to document them and preserve them in the home, at the place where they have cultural heritage significance. By comparing stories and objects over time, the MHC will be better placed to make assessments about the broader cultural heritage significance of these stories and objects and their relationship to the post-Second World War migration wave. The technology enables the significant relationships between a place, a person, their object and associated memories to be recorded in the home. As an exhibition showcase the web helps go behind closed doors and into people's homes--no matter where we live--to meet people who have shared their stories. The same people allow the MHC to research privately and family owned cultural material that would not otherwise be accessible to the public.

Understanding community

The NSW Migration Heritage Centre is not typical of the on-line museum sector in Australia. It is a cultural institution, in every sense, a heritage organization, that has on-line exhibitions as its primary form of engagement with communities. This may be contrasted with the many bricks and mortar museums, which have foot traffic as their primary means of engagement with adjunct websites or a web presence showcasing their collections or presenting interactives or on-line exhibitions. The Centre's model as a museum-without-walls and an on-line museum or heritage centre is also different to projects like the Collections Australia Network or the Powerhouse Museum's website which showcase collection holdings – dispersed and organisation-by-organisation (in the case of the former) or centralised (in the case of the latter), on-line.

The Centre draws upon environmental heritage methods adapted in recent years for use in museums to document movable heritage collections. The key to understanding the cultural heritage significance of collections is to research their provenance including historic associations with people and places.⁹ Community participation is an important component in this method to draw community knowledge into our understanding of their history and also intangible heritage values, including social value.¹⁰ The processes involved in working with the community towards the production of the on-line exhibitions are pivotal for the exhibition. Significant here is how working with the

specific communities drives the work of the organization. Indeed the MHC has considered first the ways in which it works with the idea of community because it underpins how the technology needs to work—not the other way around.

The term community is frequently used within discourses in museums to signal democracy. The term is often used interchangeably with public and audience, despite their significant differences in meaning.¹¹ The slippage can cause considerable ambiguity, and indeed render the meaning of the terms useless. However, community is used to demonstrate democracy at its most ‘genuine’ moment.¹² But what do we mean by this term in the sector?

The prevailing interpretation of community is as a phenomenon arising through choice.¹³ In cultural policy discourses on Australian culture, community connotes amateur, alternative politics and culture. Conversely it can also be equated with ‘the Australian people’ or ‘the Australian community’. This difference in meaning, it seems, is one of the fundamental issues in debates on the way in which democracy works in Australia.

Community is not always distinct from other forms of social organisation, such as the nation. While community politics aims to critique the homogenising effect of a national culture, its relationship to the state, and the rhetoric often employed by exponents of community, undermine this claim.¹⁴ In his unravelling of ‘community’ Williams defines it as:

the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society, etc*) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.¹⁵

Williams’ community identifies the relationships *between* people as comprising community, whether the ‘community/ies’ consent or not to such a relationship.

Williams’ definition has been influential in the humanities and the social sciences. Community is also defined as ‘a social network of interacting individuals usually concentrated into a defined territory.’¹⁶ It may seem that the definition of community is

bound together in this context through a common geographical location. It is acknowledged, however, that 'ethnic groups are often referred to as communities, irrespective of whether they occupy already identifiable territories.'¹⁷ However, having 'emotional ties' or 'communion' with others is also acknowledged as another aspect of the term community, where the social, and potentially the cultural, is also significant.

The notion of community may also be a material one, where 'place' or location generates communities, even those formed through social and cultural associations. The concept of a 'sense of belonging' to a locatable geographical 'community' *or* 'place,' can be extended to mean a sense of belonging to a community that is not necessarily locatable geographically, as in the case of displaced people, asylum seekers, or immigrants.¹⁸

A community is defined by the way its members consider it, through the meanings they assign to it and the ways in which they represent it.¹⁹ The term itself implies identification of a common aspect of a group, which distinguishes it from other groups.²⁰ Thus, community is both an inclusive and exclusive concept. However, communities form as part of all areas of human activity for different characteristics and affiliations, some of which may be supra-national.²¹ Religion transcends national boundaries and religious community connects followers of particular faiths internationally. Multiple communities exist within nations as well, and people may claim membership in more than one community.²² Individuals may connect with a geographic community - a particular suburb – while identifying as part of an ethnic community that exists locally or nationally.

What becomes evident in the accounts of community, as with accounts of the term public, is the complexity of these terms. The terms community and place are inextricably connected to the production of not only the material spaces, or groups of people, but cultural and political discourses of these terms. The central concern for much discussion on place and community is to respond to the problems arising from universalist conceptions of the public sphere, and in turn, public space. While museums have been aware of these issues in terms of display practices in recent decades, the tendency to universalise or over-generalise 'the audience' and the public may weaken claims of sustainable collaborations with communities. Using the concepts of community and

place can undo universalist representations of culture. In other words, working with community/ies is only useful for thinking about different models of museum practice if 'community' is distinct, not over generalised and is not easily interchangeable with audience, nation and public.

Let us reiterate what is at stake using another useful account of the term community. Jean Luc Nancy explains how its two most significant meanings are based on the German history of the word: 'community' as a self-defined group (by choice), and as a group defined by common external circumstances (not by choice).²³ He interprets the notion of community as having multiple meanings. Nancy's concept of community allows for an inter-action between seemingly contradictory notions of community. According to Nancy, a contradictory notion of community may be a situation where the community exists because of its 'lack of identity' with a place for instance.²⁴ The lack of identity, however, can be used to consider more strategically the ways in which identity politics can be re-presented and re-interpreted within community politics. The complexity of the term community is important to acknowledge in order to avoid nostalgic invocations which can mask issues of power and hence overly simplify our understanding of the term.

When we consider the work of the MHC, community resembles an alternative public that is potentially a model for 'situated democracy'. For many working in community development and NGOs, community, as constructed by the state, detracts from or dissolves certain political possibilities that exist when community is formed by choice. For Nancy, 'the political is the place where community as such is brought into play'.²⁵ Community is the site where the practices of democracy are acted out, or tolerated in their various forms.

It is necessary to work towards re-inventing community, to remember that it is a process, not a fixed 'thing' in itself. In the case of the MHC, their work with communities is based on reciprocity. Community becomes a conduit for the individual to the public sphere. Such a concept of community might enable the 'formation and maintenance of progressive political alliances ... [and maybe] the consolidation of old communities of resistance or perhaps the creation of alternative political possibilities'.²⁶ Community of

this kind can be both a characteristic of representative democracy *and* the process through which the public sphere is regenerated.

While the concept of community may offer an alternative to more universalising concepts such as public, this paper reveals that community, like the public sphere, has both limitations and advantages. The limitations of community are that its fundamental connotations may preclude critique, whereas a more nuanced, or situated, or place based, understanding of the term community counters universalising concepts like the public sphere or nation.

Rather than using community in a universal way, self-identification within a chapter in migration history, cultural themes and a sense of belonging are the understandings of community with which the MHC is engaged.

Conclusion

Many museums are increasingly using the world-wide-web to engage with communities and build new audiences by opening their collections and presenting on-line exhibitions and inter-actives. Informed by a specific understanding and use of the term community, the world-wide-web can also become a conduit to enable communities to engage with museums in new, more participatory, collaborative and potentially more democratic ways. The MHC acknowledges community cultural practices and the importance of agency in the way they work collaboratively and devise projects for on-line activity in the home. For the MHC the web allows them to showcase collections whilst leaving mementos in their historic context, that is, with the people and at the place they are associated with, and where they derive their cultural heritage significance.

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¹ See www.belongings.com.au

² 'New Body To Showcase Migrant Heritage' in *Arts Bulletin*, NSW Ministry for the Arts, August 1998

³ www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au The Centre was moved from the Premier's Department to the Powerhouse Museum in 2003. It is a NSW Government initiative supported by the Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW.

⁴ Kylie Winkworth, 'Fixing The Slums Of Australian Museums; Or Sustaining Heritage Collections In Regional Australia', *Museums Australia Conference 2005*, Unpublished conference paper, Sydney 1-4 May 2005.

⁵ www.collectionsaustralia.net/nqr/

⁶ New stories for *Belongings* are added progressively. Andrea Fernandes (Project Co-ordinator) edits the interviews for clarity and to fit on the web exhibition page. Quotations are not always exact transcripts of interviews but original recordings are preserved for use by future researchers. Interviews are conducted and presented in English, which is common practice for museums in Australia. The MHC acknowledges how this potentially distorts the historic record and may not always include former migrants who may have limited English. The use of English limits access to audiences with little or no English – an issue not confined to immigration museums and migration heritage centres but all museums.

⁷ 'Migrant Hostels in New South Wales, 1946-78' *Fact Sheet*, no 170, National Archives of Australia, March 2005.

⁸ Albury City flier distributed during NSW Migration Heritage Centre *Belongings* project 2006 and advertisement in Albury's *The Border Mail*, 18 November 2006, p27.

⁹ These are described in Michael Pearson and Sharon Sullivan's, *Looking After Heritage Places*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1995.

¹⁰ Movable heritage is a term used to define any natural or manufactured object or collection of heritage significance. The Migration Heritage Centre works from a NSW Government policy framework prepared during the NSW Heritage Office and NSW Ministry for the Arts Movable Heritage Project in 2000. It comprises guidelines and a policy written by John Petersen with a Reference Group including Kylie Winkworth, Meredith Walker, James Broadbent and Pat Townley, entitled *Objects in Their Place* and the *Movable Heritage Principles* respectively. The MHC also draws from the method described in Kylie Winkworth and Roslyn Russell's *Significance: A Guide To Assessing The Significance Of Cultural Heritage Objects And Collections*, Heritage Collections Council, 2001.

¹¹ Jennifer Barrett, 'Community, public, audience: complex and critical transactions' in Alison Beale and Annette Van den Bosch (eds) *Ghosts in the Machine*, Garamond Press, Toronto, 1998, pp. 147-162.

¹² See Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and public life in the American city during the nineteenth century*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997; Marshall Berman, 'Take it to the Street: conflict and community in public space,' *Dissent*, Fall, 1986, pp. 476-485. Peter G. Goheen, 'Public space and the geography of the modern city,' *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 22, no 4, 1998, pp. 479-496; Don Mitchell, 'The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public and Democracy,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 85(1), 1995, pp. 108-133,

¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy presents the differences between these two definitions of community as either 'being-together' or a 'being of togetherness' and that 'nothing indicates more clearly what the logic of this being of togetherness can imply than the role of 'Gemeinschaft,' of community in Nazi ideology'. See Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Preface,' *The Inoperative Community, Theory and History of Literature*, trans P. Connor, vol. 76, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991b, pp. xxxvi-xli.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, NY, 1991. It is also the case that community is used at another level again: community of nations, international community, etc. Also see Linnell Secomb, 'Interrupting Mythic Community,' *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol 9 No 1, University of Melbourne, Melbourne May 2003, pp. 85-100

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 1976. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ Johnston, 'community,' *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, 4th edn., Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, p. 101-102.

¹⁷ Johnston, 'community,' *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, 2000, p. 102.

¹⁸ Robert Archibold has written about how in the west there ‘is a deepening crisis of place and [an] accompanying ennui of placelessness’. For Archibold this ‘lack of attachment to place disembodies memory... [and] threatens democracy itself, which so much depends upon those “mystic chords of memory” and habits that bind us to one another in a shared voluntary pursuit of the common good’. Place and community, for Archibold, are interdependent. Robert R. Archibald, *The New Town Square: Museums and Communities in Transition*, AltaMira, New York, 2004, p. 1.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, ‘New Cultures for Old’, in *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalization*, edited by Doreen Massey and Pat Jess, The Open University and Oxford, Milton Keynes and Oxford, 1995, p. 182.

²⁰ Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004.

²¹ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 153; see also Hall, 1995, pp. 80-81.

²² Jerry Frug, ‘The Geography of Community’, *Stanford Law Review* vol. 48, no. 5, May, 1996, pp. 1047-1108.

²³ Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Of Being-in-Common,’ Miami Theory Collective, (eds) *Community at Loose Ends*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1991, pp. 1-13. See also, Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1991.

²⁴ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 1991, p. xxxviii

²⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 1991, p. xxxvii

²⁶ Micheal Keith and Steve Pile, ‘Introduction part 2: The place of politics,’ in Keith and Pile, (eds.), *place and the politics of identity*, Routledge, 1993, pp.22-40.