Museums and Communities
Curators, Collections, and Collaboration

Edited by
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Michael Frisch describes the relationship between public historians and those who contribute to historical understanding through their lived experience and knowledge as one of "shared authority" (1990). In this chapter, I use shared authority as a platform for discussing the whys and hows of embedding collaboration between museum curators and participants from outside the museum in exhibition making. My interest in such a practical application of shared authority is grounded in a desire to create exhibitions that include and open up conversations across socially and culturally diverse positions. I argue that sharing authority in practice requires attention to the agency of curatorial voices as well as those of participants. I also argue for making the agency of the collaborators and their interaction visible in outcomes of collaborative work. In particular, I suggest that agency and egalitarian interaction should be of central concern in developing and selecting material and in managing elements of design such as graphics, audio, and fabrication forms.

My premise and contention is that working with and demonstrating an egalitarian conversation between differently located authorities, from the development of an exhibition into its fabric, plays a crucial role in creating an open, dialogue-inviting exhibition, encouraging audiences to respond from their own experience and knowledge. An inherent problem in this position is that individual experience is framed by wider discourses, including stereotypical views of "others." The approaches I discuss address this issue in several ways. First, they demonstrate sharing authority in exhibitions as an "alongside" conversational relationship between different experiences and knowledges, thus providing a model for audience engagement against hierarchical stereotypes. Second, they use individual experiences, rather than framing experiences as those of particular social groups, to invite responses related to one's own life and history rather than abstract generalizations about others. Third, in relation to this potential response, they present personal experience as both historical/social/cultural and as a distinct, embodied configuration of these dimensions. This third approach particularly connects with the use of
interpreting strategies that invite an intimate and imaginative relationship with exhibition material.

My thinking about shared authority as I discuss it in practice here is informed by my experience of working in museums, and particularly influenced by my work as a writer and public historian. My experiences with community groups and individuals who wish to make their experiences of and perspective on social life, history, and place visible, through exhibitions of personal experience, have given me a powerful sense of the power of individual experiences of personal experience, to engage the imagination of readers and invite them to see the world in a different way. My work is an attempt to provide a new way of thinking about the relationship between different forms of knowledge, and to explore the power of personal experience in shaping our understanding of the world.

My discussion draws on material from a research project called Migration Memories, which explored the potential for collaborative approaches to exhibiting Australian migration history. The exhibitions were created in partnership with community participants, and the research was based on interviews with them about the methods of working with and collaborating in the creation of the exhibitions. The research was guided by a sense of the power of personal experience in shaping our understanding of the world, and the potential for these experiences to be shared and used to shape our understanding of the world.

Theoretical and Practical Background

Museum Studies Context

Theoretically, my interest in shared authority is based on the understanding that museums, as cultural institutions, are social agents. In their collection and display of cultural and historical material, they express and promote certain understandings of national culture and cultures. Sheila Watson highlights the role of 1960s radical politics in encouraging critical awareness of the museum's social role and the emergence of the new museology movement in response (2007: 13). New museology is one way of describing a body of practical and theoretical museum work that takes account of the way museums position cultures and social identities in their collections and exhibitions and of the way they interact with their publics. One major area of discussion has been Western museums' management of colonial collections (e.g., Clifford 1997; Peers and Brown 2003). Another concerns the museum's role in and relationship with the increasingly diverse multicultural societies in which it operates. In 1997, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) produced a policy statement on museums and cultural diversity, with a view to "eradicate[ing] past and present inequalities in cultural representation of diverse peoples" (1997: 3). More recently, the Council of Europe has identified museums and heritage sites as spaces not just for recognition of one identity or another, but also for intercultural dialogue (2008-33). Typically, the new museology is interested in encouraging the participation of individuals and engaging diverse audiences in ways that are inclusive and democratic.

Shared Authority

Michael Frisch's use of the term shared authority in reference to both interpretive authority and shared authority was taken up by Oral historians in the 1990s, and continues to resonate in oral history discourse. What shared authority does is to acknowledge what Frisch describes as both scholarly authority and the authority of "culture and experience" (1990: xvi). It highlights the agency of both positions and identifies the relationship between them as an egalitarian exchange between distinct kinds of expertise. As Frisch describes it, this exchange may take place between historian and informant participant or between a public presentation of history and its audience. He suggests that dialogue between scholarly and experiential knowledge takes into the "method" of public presentation may "more deeply characterise the experience of finished products themselves" and as a result "promote a more democratised and widely shared historical consciousness" (1990: xxii).

Shared authority as exchange or dialogue between distinct expertise takes us right away from a dualistic either/or relationship between "community" and "scholarship," but it also demands the presence of both as effective interacting players. Caring for the agency of community participants also means caring for our own. This typical absence of the scholarly voice in interviews with "informants" is highlighted in a 1993 article by
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which the voices of the participants who contributed material, the curator, and members of the audience could be part of a balanced conversation that included a variety of experiences and points of view concerning Australian migration history. The focus on place as a shared experience was one way of framing this conversation. Another was to take migration as a historical theme rather than primarily as a cultural experience. In this way, Australian migration history could be seen as something that resonates in the lives of all Australians and could include descendants of British colonizers and indigenous people who have suffered the consequences of colonization, particularly through displacement and forced migrations. The exhibitions included indigenous perspectives on migration, as well as those that showed a variety of experiences of coming to Australia from the colonial period (first settlement 1788) to the present. In further support of the focus on migration history as an alternative to easily stereotyped migrant cultures, individuals and their experiences were featured in the exhibition for their meaning to them, whatever their material culture dimensions.

Necessarily, the project took place on a small scale—even a small exhibition takes time, and my methods of working were designed to develop and investigate relationships, not simply produce outcomes. So in each location I identified six major migration periods from the colonization period to the present and looked for people interested in developing a story for display, whether it was a story of an ancestor or their own experience. The indigenous perspective featured in seven stories in each exhibition.

Within this framework, my aim was to show each individual migration experience as the storyteller understood it and in its historical context. This was researched as the storylines of the personal story became clear. In the exhibitions, the curatorial voice and the voice of experience were presented alongside each other, implicitly and sometimes explicitly in dialogue.

Inevitably, wider discourses of settlement, migration, and colonization spoke through the personal perspectives, but they spoke in particular ways. For instance, one storyteller saw the colonial history of her pastoral property in terms of more contemporary discourses about migration and focused on the connections between indigenous, Chinese, and British cultures rather than the more popular “pioneering” discourse of the heroic settlement of the land. On the other hand, the teller of a story of an Italian migrant who arrived in the 1920s used the term pionerings to express his father’s experience as the first one to go to Australia from his village in Sicily.

The development process with the storytellers was one of quite intense collaboration. Decisions were made with them on all details of content—their own and the curatorial mindset, images, captions, objects, and object labels or descriptions—and on the broad design approach. Participants signed off on a mock-up of the display of their stories.

For the realization of each exhibition, I also worked collaboratively with a designer, a photographer, and a sound artist. Sound was a very important component of the exhibitions, and like the main exhibition material was created with local participants. In Lightning Ridge, I worked with designer Iona Walsh and photographer Jenni Brammall; in Robinvale I collaborated with Paula McKindlay and Jo Sheldrick. Leo Collins served as the sound artist in both locations (Hutchison and Collins 2009).

Migration Memories: The Research

In the context of critiques of the Australian multicultural migration exhibition, Migration Memories was one of a growing number of initiatives seeking alternatives to the static display of difference in celebration of the contribution of “other”—non- British, overseas—cultures to the Australian way of life (Hutchison 2009; McShane 2007; Witcomb 2009). Specifically, the research explored ways of making an exhibition that
Methods of Embedding Shared Authority in Exhibition Content and Design

Migration Memories worked with agency and collaboration in the process of developing the exhibition, in selection of content, and in the choice of interpretive strategies and design forms. The research premise was that shared authority could not be honored in one without the other. This section of the chapter focuses on content and design with some reference to the development process.

Developing Content and Design as a Collaborative, Evolving Process

Embedding shared authority in the exhibition involved the development of content and design in relation to each other as an evolving and collaborative process. The exhibition designers did not work with a cut and dry design brief. They were invited to respond to the individual stories as they took shape and were involved in various ways in discussion with participants. They worked closely with me on the translation of the research's democratic intentions into the fabrication and graphics of the exhibitions. For instance, in designing Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge, Lisa Walsh saw the importance of creating an exhibition that did not exceed personal height so that audience and material were on a similar scale. She also wanted to open up the relationship between viewer and material in other ways. Her design invited audiences to walk around panels and look into cases from varying angles, thus marking the difference between displays as a visceral experience through bodily movement.

This evolving approach also meant that we could respond to opportunities that emerged throughout the work in each locality. As it turned out, each exhibition included an unplanned additional element of display that drew in other local residents apart from the main storytellers.

Embedding Agency and Shared Authority in the Subject of the Exhibition

The individual migration stories, as a combination of personal and historical perspectives, were the subject and main substance of the exhibition. They were not illustrations of history and culture not used as a device to make the real information more personal or engaging. By the same token, the historical text was written and placed so that it did not frame the personal but suggest itself as more important. The use of personal images as well as official images mirrored the approach to the text. In the event, while I was at pains to show the seams, my experience was that visitors tended to read the story seamlessly and always identified the story by its teller—"the chap who thought he was going to Argentina." This identification was supported by creating each story as a stand-alone display which, as far as possible, had a distinct form within the overall design—so as to be recognizable as, say, Lovelyn's story or Tony's story.

The introductions to the local exhibitions established the subject and fitted into the structure of the rest of the exhibition, which was based on distinction rather than hierarchy. They had the same design form and dimensions as the story panels. They did not frame the stories with an overall view, but simply provided information about the nature of the migration history, the research, and the people involved. Most important, they sought to do this from the position of the collaborative making of the exhibitions.

Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge is part of a research project about Australian migration histories and ways of creating exhibitions with a personal focus. It tells the stories of seven individuals from Lightning Ridge. The storytellers have worked with researcher and curator Mary Hutchison and designer Lisa Walsh to develop their stories for display...

As well as the storytellers, many other Lightning Ridge individuals and organisations have been involved with Migration Memories. They welcome you and invite you to enjoy the exhibition.

It is worth noting that a visitor to the Lightning Ridge exhibition who had experience as a museum volunteer found the non-hierarchical approach very confusing. As she saw it, the exhibition was "muddled." She couldn't work out where it began or what belonged with what story. This concern was an exception, but it suggests the tradition of museum exhibition that relies on what Freire called the "banking" system of education in which knowledgeable teachers make "deposits" into the heads of relatively ignorant learners (1972: 45, 59). My experience of watching audiences at the local venues was that those who were not schooled in this tradition engaged freely with the material—usually heading first to a story they knew something of and then seeking others as they wished.

Presenting Historical Content alongside the Personal Story

As indicated, Migration Memories was grounded in the intention to show the relationship between personal experience and historical/social context. In addition, the presentation of this through two sets of authored text showed these as two forms of knowledge in side-by-side dialogue. My position is that this demonstration of dialogues between personal/historical authority and the authority of experience in the embodied form of two storytellers—Mary and, say, Jennifer—may create a non-threatening and non-patronizing invitation to audience to enter the conversation from the point of view of their own experience. However, this doesn't work by device only—it requires attention to the development of content. To achieve a balance between forms of knowledge that might ordinarily be seen in a hierarchical relationship, historical context was developed in response to the individuals' stories and what was important to them. And just as the personal story was told through images, objects, and text, historical information was provided in the form of archival images and documents as well as text. For instance in Susan Maltz's story...
of escaping from military service in the former Yugoslavia in the 1960s, a strong personal memory was the basis for providing information about Australia's immigration publicity machine of the time.

In the refugee camp in Austria they showed us films about Australia. It's the nicest country on earth—green, all rivers, no deserts, beautiful. The place is full of fruit trees and people speaking many European languages. A typical bush paradise publicity image featuring a smiling young couple running hand in hand along the shoreline rescued from Immigration Department files in the National Archives accompanied these words. In combination they raised many smiles.

An example from Sothea Thea's story of escaping the civil war in Cambodia in a leaking fishing boat shows the use of text to describe an event from both personal and historical angles. In this case, it is the event of arrival in Australia in 1990.

**Sothea**

_Navy take us to Darwin port. Immigration send us to camp in the bush. Volunteers come to visit. They give us clothes and teach us English. Then Immigration send us to Port Hedland. We don't know where we are or how long we have to stay there. Just waiting._

**Mary**

_Between 1989 and 1991 several groups of Cambodians arrived by boat on the northern shore of Australia. Their applications for asylum were the catalyst for the Labor Government's 1992 immigration legislation which established mandatory detention for people arriving without authorisation._

Using _Democratic Interpretive Strategies_

While my research and discussion are based on the understanding that individual knowledge and experience is framed by and expressed through the language of wider discourses, I also use the idea that neither individuals nor discourses are fixed or singular and that the human capacity to imagine and empathize, as bell hooks argues, may move individuals into less familiar territory (1991: 57–58). In taking the theory of the “dialogic” exhibition (Bennett 2006: 63) into practice, Migration Memories used interpretive strategies that took their inspiration from techniques writers use to engage readers in the world of story. In this I followed hooks’s discussion of critical fiction and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theorizing of the novel as a dialogic and essentially democratic form that invites readers to engage “on the same plane” as its narrator and characters (Vice 1997: 112). Migration Memories experimented with creating the exhibitions as open dialogic “texts” by attending to techniques such as precise description, metaphor and images, distinct characters, direct speech, and clearly defined points of view within a narrative structure. These devices create a world a reader may enter as an equal and intimate participant because it is embodied and material. It can be heard, seen, smelled, tasted, and touched and, through the senses, felt emotionally. The story of this world unfolds through the relationship between its elements through interaction and reaction (Hutchinson 2009: 78–80).

Each story, including the selection of material to tell it, was based on its particular circumstances and the feelings and meanings it held for the teller. Images, objects, and text were juxtaposed to show rather than tell the story and its wider history. Although there were explanatory aspects within the material, it was arranged to make sense through connection and association rather than through exposition. This open method of putting material together creates the space necessary for audiences to imagine and feel the experience. For instance, an image of the clothes the Cambodian asylum seeker, Sothea, wore on his terrifying twenty-eight-day sea journey to Australia was integrated into the panel design with the following text:

_Seventy nine people on the boat including men, women and children. From memory the boat was about 20 metres long and 4 metres wide. I am alone so I stay in front where no-one else goes. At night the water comes over but I find a small space I can lie down in. I pull the sleeves of my jacket down over my hands to keep warm and turn my back on the water._

The same sort of space was created by allowing tensions and questions, loss and hope, vulnerability and strength to be part of each story. A particular example is provided in the story of Jennifer Collins’s grandparents. In 1913, Jennifer’s Irish grandmother, Catherine, who had arrived in Australia in the 1880s, went to America, leaving her German husband and their two small boys in Lightning Ridge. She never returned. The panel dealing with his migration included images of the Christmas cards Catherine sent to her grandchildren in Lightning Ridge in the 1940s and 1950s. They were accompanied by Jennifer’s memory of having to write back to her grandmother because her father didn’t want to do it himself. Another feature of this section of the story was a 1912 photo of Catherine with her two young sons in the Sydney Botanic Gardens. Jennifer’s text here read:

_I used to wonder why Dad always took us to the Botanic Gardens, but I think it might have been because that’s where his mother used to take him and Uncle Bill when they went to Sydney._

My own text raised possible reasons for the situation on the basis of wider issues such as World War I and the decline of Germany’s role in the opal trade. Events and experiences within the stories were specified through details of memory, sensation, and feelings of the moment. For instance, the second generation of the Tongan family in Australia, Joseph, Christopher, and Mele, remembered their trip to Robinvale in this way:
It was a 10 or 12 hour trip from Wellington to Robinville in Dad’s 1984 Chrysler Valiant. The old brown Valiant. All of us jam-packed in there with blankets and clothes. The back seat made into bed for us three kids.14

In Joan Treweeke’s story of the three different cultures that came together on her pastoral property in the colonial period, three objects found on the station provided the abstract concept of culture with solid and distinct material shapes: a grinding stone, a piece of pottery marked with a Chinese character, and a cattle branding iron.

The exhibitions also sought to give the viewer a sense of each locality as a particular migration destination by using key material qualities of place in the exhibition design. For instance, in Robinville, Paula McKendlay used a curved panel shape as a reference to the River Murray and a detail of a map of the river as a graphic panel motif. Another example of locating migration was the use of graphic maps created by the designers to specify the places and distances of each individual migration in the context of contemporary population movements. These proved a consistent point of interest for audiences, who traced the lines of movement on the map and then looked for other places known to them, often because of association with someone they knew.

**Shared Authority in Exhibition Text, Graphics, Images, and Objects**

This section of the chapter looks at how the exhibitions sought to use democratic interpretive strategies in the display of text, graphics, images, and objects and discusses issues arising from this exploration. The sound installations were a particular experiment in this regard and are the subject of a separate publication (Hutchinson and Collins 2009).

**Text and Graphics**

The graphic representation of text, as well as the text itself, was seen as relevant to presenting curatorial and personal text as different but equal dimensions of historical experience. The title of each story located it in time and place and showed its joint authorship—for example: “From Italy 1925 to Robinville 1936. Tony Pissale in conversation with Mary Hutchison.” The distinct pieces of text were headed by our first names—Tony or Mary—and given a graphic treatment that distinguished the text but gave it equal status. Despite my desire not to use italics for the personal text, it was presented in a very light form of italic that was larger than the sans serif curatorial text. Shading and color further identified the particular perspective, creating "zones" for each.

The shared making of the story across personal and historical interests was also shown through direct references to the dialogue between curator and storyteller. In Gabo (known as Gobo) Nagy’s story, authored by him and his daughter Sheila, a vital official document was the medical examination form that showed the photo of him taken at the displaced persons’ camp in Naples in 1947. His children had never seen a photo of him as a young man, so it had great emotional importance as well as referring to immigration processes of the time. Sheila’s text read:

> We didn’t know much about Dad’s life before he came here. Finding the documents was really exciting, quite emotional—finding out things you never knew.15

Another panel from Gabo’s story concerned his journey from postwar Debrecen to Naples. The journey was rendered graphically alongside his fragments of memory. Sheila’s words introduced the story: “When Mary asked Dad questions little things came back to him.”16 These examples show the storyteller’s experience of making the story as well as the collaboration to make it. As well as showing process, this demonstrated that the story did not have a fixed or prior existence.

Several stories involved more than one storyteller or author—as with Gabo’s story. In Robinville, the involvement of the parents and three children in a Tongan family (the subject of a previous example) created the possibility of showing both first- and second-generation experiences. In telling Kay Grose’s story of the colonial period in Robinville, we sought advice from Aboriginal elders and included some of their perspectives alongside what she and I had to say. The designer created another text zone for these voices with circles interspersed at intervals through the panel.

The examples I have used of the worlds of the storytellers show that storyteller text reflected individuals’ particular rhythms of speech and turns of phrase. It was essentially what they said and how they spoke, but it was not a simple, transparent selection of material. What became the storyteller text was drawn from digitally recorded conversations as well as my notes of conversations, and edited and reworked as necessary with the relevant storytellers. The process was that I made initial selections to go with the shape and content of the story as it had been agreed on. Then, as with all exhibition text, it was a matter of cutting and cutting. Many decisions with participants revolved around what areas of content to keep, what to delete, and what to prune. Cutting some bits then affected the content and expression of the bits that were left. Generally, we made broad decisions together; I then refined the text in response—always drawing on their words—and took the result back. From this it can be seen that the specific wording of text was an ongoing work in progress. The initial selections were generally composed of lightly edited verbatim material—often we had gone over the same thing several times and it had been recorded in various ways and expressed verbally several times. In going over these pieces of text to check them or make decisions about keeping or cutting, I read them aloud, which enabled quick clarifications and refinements. But there was also the opportunity to read and think over the inclusions. My own interest was always in retaining how people said things in a way that would make sense to a stranger, convey the distinct character of the speaker, and honor the telling. As an example, John Kuli’s text with his sketch from memory of the landscape of the Greek village he had left as a child read:
You look at the mountains there, they’re totally different. The heritage you left behind, it just seems to be inside you, it just draws me, it’s like a bloody magnet.12

I was always struck by the way he talked about his village, and I collected various ways in which he had expressed his sense of place. My memory is that this piece of text didn’t come together until I read back something he had written on it one day and he said, “Yeah, it’s like a bloody magnet.” He was happy for it to be finalized in that way.

Perhaps not surprising, shaping my own text as the distinct historian-curatorial character, Mary, was more problematic. In Lightning Ridge, I used the first person at least once in each story. In Robinvale, I relied on the use of my name with my text. On reflection, the use of the first person seems stronger—it shows that the professional position is as active and experiencing as that of the participant.

What really struck me in Dusan’s story was the connection between his work and Australia’s really big construction schemes. The labour of new migrants was essential to Australia’s industrial development in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.13

Images:

Official and personal photographs and documents played a vital role in specifying place, experience, and historical context. The major question I had in relation to images and participant agency concerned the use of images of the participants themselves. In the Migration Memories exhibitions, I was determined to show the storytellers in their environments and in action—whether working or eating or doing something else—not posing at the camera as an illustration of themselves. This caused some controversy—some viewers felt that each story should have a contemporary portrait of the storyteller, and the National Museum introduction to the exhibitions used one of the very few existing images of each individual. Alternatively, there are a number of examples of lively, agentic images produced through collaboration between individuals being photographed and photographers. The portrait of a woman created for the Docklands Museum Sugar and Slavery exhibition is one such instance.

Objects:

As indicated, the objects displayed in the exhibition were chosen by the storytellers because they had important meaning for their story rather than wider cultural meaning. Text information about the objects using participants’ own words was used to convey this personal meaning and provide some basic cultural and historical details—but this potential dialogue was not explored to the same extent as the personal story or the wider history. The use of objects and the presentation of their varying meanings in display form was one of the most challenging and least resolved aspects of the research. Each of the exhibitions tried a different approach.

In Lightning Ridge, objects were displayed in standard museum cases co-located with the panels. We experimented rather tentatively with large vinyl lettering on the cases to capture personal meaning; for instance, with Lovelyn’s old vinyl handbag from her flight to Australia from the Philippines: “My uncle said to me, take only your handbag, don’t look back, whatever you have in the cupboard, forget it.” We were aiming for a sense of the object as agent. Vinyl lettering was similarly used with Jennifer Colless’s grandfather’s opal cutting machine: “Dad’s say, now Jen, I want half the thickness of a cigarette paper off that stone.” The more label-like text with the opal cutter concerned its use by three generations of the family in accord with Jennifer’s sense that it stood for their survival in Lightning Ridge “through thick and thin.” But the opal cutter also had wider stories to tell. Research by the National Museum revealed that its frame had been manufactured in America in the late nineteenth century. More recent modifications to it were typical of opal fields invention. My own research suggested that Jennifer’s grandfather had saved it from a fire at White Cliffs opal fields and brought it with him to Lightning Ridge. For me, an important finding of the Migration Memories experiments was that privileging personal experience and social context as an alternative to cultural stereotypes was that it opened up a way of reconnecting with the larger story of material culture. It was not possible to try this out within the frame of the research, but the potential for exhibiting objects in a way that included material culture and historical and personal perspectives alongside each other seemed strong.

In Robinvale, the research highlighted objects as embodiments of personal meaning by using images of those selected within the panel design. Small objects that could not be integrated into the panels were displayed in their material form. A photographer was employed to take photographs of objects and encouraged to use her sensibility as portrait photographer rather than strive for images that provided a clinical description of the object. The photographer and exhibition designer then worked together on the panel design. The image of Sothea’s clothes discussed earlier is an example of this approach.

Another issue that added to the complexity of experimenting with the agentic display of objects was that, as might be expected, not all storytellers actually had a personal migration object. Sometimes the quest led to items that would not usually be thought of as objects. In Robinvale, sounds had particular meaning for several of the storytellers: Italian opera, terrain lines of the Greek national anthem, Tongan church choirs, the theme music of the television soap opera Neighbours. They were rather awkwardly incorporated into the sound installation, as we did not have the resources to create sound with the individual displays. Similarly, in Lovelyn’s Lightning Ridge story, I always felt that the most striking and expressive objects she offered were things people had said to her. The handbag was a fortuitous discovery rather than the thing itself.

There were also occasions when it was appropriate to invite storytellers to create an object that expressed something central to their experience. These, vested with the person’s making, were often seen as the most touching objects in the exhibitions. Aunty
Collaborations

Each collaboration with the storytellers was different, but all involved decisions and issues that had to be carefully considered. For example, Lovelyn Miglietta migrated to Lightning Ridge from the Philippines as the wife of an Australian resident—herself originally from Italy—in 1994. There has been much publicity about the problems of such marriages and the women are often described in a derogatory way as mail-order brides. While Lovelyn’s marriage and her wedding memorabilia were in many ways central to her story, we were both hesitant about locating them at the heart of the display. Instead, we developed it as a story of *pakikipagsalatan*, “finding my destiny,” with her marriage as one step in this. We tried a number of storylines before we arrived at *pakikipagsalatan*, and with more time we could have made this stronger. It was one of those stories where new elements, issues, and objects kept coming to the surface. We did a lot of reworking from the mockup stage. Lovelyn checked everything extremely carefully for its possible impact on her husband or other members of her family. We also made a change as a result of her husband’s response to the exhibition in Lightning Ridge. This was immensely important and he was really pleased to come to the Canberra opening.

The collaborative process was intimate but defined by the distinct positions of storyteller and professional researcher and curator. The individuals concerned understood that, although they told me much about themselves, it was related to the topic of migration and was for a specific purpose. In turn, I often sought their advice on how the community worked and what might be appropriate in a given situation. They were the experts on their history and place, I was the expert on history and making an exhibition.

As part of the research, I interviewed the participants about their experience of the process at three different stages of our work together. These interviews were not intended to evaluate the conduct of the process, but to document decisions we had arrived at, the negotiation of particular issues, and the development of our collaboration. One of the things I found through the interviews was that across various motivations for getting involved—including doing something to benefit the community—storytellers often recorded a similar experience.

Len: When I went into it I roughly knew the direction but I didn’t really know which—whether we were going to go down the middle or right, left or centre or where, but I can see where we’ve been now. [laughter]

Mary: So taking that kind of stab doesn’t really worry you?

Len: No, not at all—on the contrary probably enjoy going that track rather than “yes Mary, no Mary.”[9]

When professional expertise holds the status of the authority, developing a relationship based on shared authority and requiring joint decisions may seem aimless and time-consuming. Like Len Arnott, Aunty June Barker recorded some time of confusion, but did so with a sense of her own agency.

I couldn’t see what was in it, but I thought, now I’ll hang in there with this one [laughing] because I knew . . . that what we were talking about would come altogether.[9]

My first interpretation of responses like these was that the people who agreed to be storytellers shared a preparedness for giving things a go and seeing them through over ups and downs. On closer scrutiny, and with the knowledge of enjoyment of the process, I think that. Despite some confusion, insistence on sharing authority was a better “track . . . than ‘yes Mary, no Mary.’”[9]

The shared authority of the collaborative process is highlighted on the Migration Memories website, where both the storytellers and my experience of the process are shown. My experience concerns the issues of developing the story from my position as a professional.

We focused on Tony’s father in the exhibition. His mother was an equally strong character, but her experience was that of a woman, and while sensitive to it, Tony was not so connected with it. When I talked with Tony’s sisters, Nella and Grace, at the exhibition, I also became aware of how different their experience as second-generation women was from Tony’s. If I had worked with one of them, the story would have taken quite a different direction.[9]

But there was another more personal level of exchange and change from my point of view. For instance, I was nervous about how Duane and I would get on. He was represented to me as something of a hard man, given to action rather than words, but to my amazement, and probably his, he stretched out into reflection with me. Even though at times we made little sense to each other, there was a strong feeling of the pleasure we were both taking in thinking about the meaning of things.

Collaboration between professionals and participants is often concerned with maintaining the status quo rather than allowing the inevitable impact of interaction. For Duane, Migration Memories opened up the possibility to look back over his life. For Aunty June and Uncle Roy Barker, the invitation to think about the indigenous
experience in the context of migration history was also an important experience. When I attended a paper given by Roy on the theme of indigenous mobility and migration at an indigenous studies conference, I made a point of saying that I hadn’t considered migration as an issue for indigenous people until he and June had worked with me on Migration Memories.

Sothea’s story provides an example of how the Migration Memories website has offered a new chapter in the making of ‘participants’ stories’—and a new chapter in their story. The website uses the image of Sothea’s clothes with her text: “These are my only clothes I had to wear on the boat, I keep them to remember my journey.” Sothea has put this image and a link to the website on his Facebook page. One of the comments he has received is “Cool jacket and jeans from 90s I guess.” He has responded by filling the writer in on the origins of the jacket and its family connections.

The collaboration with individual participants, as well as with the community organisations that supported the project, was based on the idea of exchange—of a relationship based on mutual interest but not necessarily the same outcomes. For me, the exhibitions were a research process, but for Robinvale Neighbourhood Centre they were an opportunity to do something for Robinvale; for Tony Pisarski it was an opportunity to continue a reflection he had already begun. Lovelock’s participation was part of her determination to contend with popular conceptions about her migration experience. Her growth in confidence during the process was a growth in capacity to do this. When I e-mailed her about discussing her story in this chapter, she wrote back: “By all means you can talk about my migration story... I’m so proud working with you Mary, my self-confidence was built up since I worked with you... [my husband] and the rest of my family will be happy for sure for you to discuss my migration story.”

My own response to the experience of the collaborations has the same satisfying memory of swimming well in uncharted waters of developing relationships with people I would not normally meet, and of making something together that documents our exchange.

Audience

In seeking audience responses to the exhibitions, I wanted to set up a method of collecting them in which researchers and viewers were in an egalitarian relationship, not the satisfied/disappointed customer position vis-a-vis professional success or failure, nor the “have your say” or “tell us your story” approaches, which are both essentially paternalistic. Alternatively, I wanted to know what the exhibitions made people feel and think about rather than what they thought of them in evaluative terms. This approach also met my interest in finding out whether visitors connected with the material in the dialogue way intended.

As ambitious intention that the research was not able to take up was to incorporate audience feelings, thoughts, and memories into the fabric of the exhibition. The idea here was for audience members to collaborate in an ongoing making through their knowledge and experience. Instead, collecting visitor responses was based on a more literal extension of the exhibition context.

Capturing audience experiences at the local exhibitions included observation and listening in to conversations (Leinhardt and Knuotson 2004) between visitors, but was largely focused on notes of conversations between research personnel and visitors. At the National Museum, a questionnaire was the main form of response gathering. An additional experiment there was setting up informal conversations with two or three visitors together.

Visitor responses at local venues showed the greatest potential for democratizing historical understanding by taking shared authority into the method of public presentation, as Fuchs suggests. In both locations, particularly at Robinvale, where interest in community is more widespread than in Lightning Ridge, there was strong interest in filling out the history of local people and of the locality. Across both localities, some local visitors saw the exhibition as an opportunity to return their community.

It’s like I think you have walked into a really living room and there are all these people who have all known each other and who thought they knew each other. But you [exhibition curator] actually connected some of them more to each other by reintroducing them to each other... Even though one has known them, but never actually known what their connection is something else—to the bigger picture—was.

The local exhibition contexts had a related, familiar territory feel conducive to fingerling and chatting. Visitors often knew each other and would spend a moment to catch up, with the exhibition often providing an initial talking point. As I have mentioned, preconceptions about exhibitions were few and far between. By contrast, the exhibition at the National Museum was in a small space within a large open space whose exhibits interpreted broad themes of Australian social life. A number of responses to the questionnaire indicated that the exhibition was a chance for responses about the museum more generally. Visitors reflected the difficulty of viewing a specifically located exhibition in this context and one that was not primarily a collection of objects. By contrast, the conversations with visitors at the museum, at the regional venues, reflected the complexity of audience response. The frame of mind of the moment—“is there somewhere to cut around here”?—as well as existing ways of seeing, are always part of the mix, but conversations also showed the capacity of talk around an exhibition to extend the material on display through audience members’ own experiences and their varied responses to those of others. This is not to suggest that some conversations did not involve around stereotypes, but sometimes there was a struggle to make them fit. A number of responses used the phrase “you just don’t realize.”

Conclusion

The Migration Memories exploration of shared authority methodology, in the use of character and narrative and collaborations between museums and creative arts practice,
shares features made visible in other exhibitions, notably Maton et al. in this volume. I shall highlight some key characteristics and questions raised in the application of the theory-driven shared authority approach.

A central issue for the collaborative activity was the tension between scholarly authority—embodied by myself as the curator—and the individual storytellers. Despite detailed decision making, most storytellers could not envisage the final exhibition and so shared authority was limited, but participants had agency and saw their role as an exciting and meaningful aspect of skills and knowledge exchange. In hindsight, making the interaction between scholarly and personal voices visible in the exhibition could have been used more extensively, to cross generation and gender, perhaps. Collaboration with designers also warrants further concern for the participants as “clients.”

The National Museum’s outreach support for community collaboration may be extended through partnership and guest exhibitions rather than through organizational change. Place offered a frame for bringing different experiences and perspectives into relationship with each other, but a stronger sense of differences and connections could have been achieved; for example, design and personal objects might show the local in the national context not as a “special effect,” but representing different knowledge and the many places that inhere in one place.

Finally, Frisch’s “shared authority,” based on the intimate interaction between oral history interviewer and narrator, offers a space that has not been colonized by “community engagement,” which can resemble a marketing strategy more than a democratic process. It rather engages across different skills, knowledge, cultures, viewpoints; making connections and reacting to these. To use Elspeth Probyn’s metaphor for contact between self and other as surface contacts “on the skin” (1996: 3–15), collaboration may be rough and smooth; it creates movement and change and the product reflects particular exchanges.

Notes
1. I carried out the research, which included developing the exhibitions, through an Australian Research Council Linkage Project based at the Research School of Humanities at the Australian National University and in partnership with the National Museum of Australia.
2. A mark of the community’s sense of ownership of the Robinvale exhibition was the Neighbourhood Centre’s decision to enter it in the annual Victorian Community History awards. They won the award in the category of best exhibition—and won the recognition they wanted as a community keen to explore opportunities.
3. In talking with visitors about things that stood out for them about the exhibitions, I usually had to ask directly what they thought about the authored text.
18. I am grateful to Aileen PascualTan for providing me with information about the role that "pahalagang supraplanar" plays in Filipino women’s migration stories.

References
One Voice to Many Voices?
Displaying Polyvocality in an Art Gallery

Rhiannon Mason, Christopher Whitehead, and Helen Graham

Voice has emerged as a crucial issue in the design of exhibitions. ... How can museums make space for the voices of indigenous experts, members of communities represented in exhibitions and artists? ... How can the widely varying voices of museum visitors be heard by exhibition makers and reflected in their designs? Can an exhibition contain more than one voice, or can a voice exhibit more than one message? (Lavine 1991: 151)

Since the 1990s, there has been increasing discussion about community involvement and participation in museums and, to a lesser extent, art galleries, giving rise to terms such as consultation, outreach, inclusion, engagement, in-curcuration, and co-production (Black 2010; Crooke 2010; Fouseki 2010; Karp and Lavine 1991; Lang, Reeve, and Woolard 2006; Lynch 2011; Lynch and Alberti 2010; Sandell 2002; Waton 2007). Each of these terms has different connotations and politics in terms of how much control is retained, ceded, or shared by institutions and individuals. This reframing of the relationship between museums, galleries, and their publics has raised many issues. It calls into question the traditional roles of curators and—from one perspective—the museum’s ability and responsibility to maintain quality, expertise, and professional standards. Viewed from the other side, this reframing problematizes what counts as quality and accepted standards of museum practice and whose purposes they serve. It raises questions about different types of knowledge and how they come to be valued and validated within the public museum or gallery. This gives new impetus to the long-standing question within new museology of how to deal with conflicting perspectives, competing agendas, issues of control, and who has the authority to speak on behalf of others.

At the same time, the principle of greater public involvement and ownership of what happens in museums and galleries has been criticized as sometimes falling into the trap of tokenism when translated into actual practice (Fouseki 2010; Lynch 2011) and producing oversimplified, reified notions of representativeness, identity, public, and community. More trenchant critiques suggest that certain tenets of new museology have been premised on either an overly optimistic and unrealizable view of the museum as a place affected with inequalities yet also capable of being “redeemed” (Dibley 2005), or an