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**Honouring the concept of ‘shared authority’: collaboration, curatorial voice
and exhibition design.**

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Introduction

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. 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 form. I also argue for making the agency of the collaborators and their interaction visible in outcomes of collaborative work.

My premise is that together these approaches offer a methodology for making open, dialogue-inviting exhibitions that invite 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’. But the approaches I discuss address this in several ways. Firstly, the demonstration of ‘shared authority’ in exhibitions as an ‘alongside’ conversational

relationship between different experiences and knowledges, provides a model for audience engagement against hierarchical stereotypes. Secondly, the use of individual experiences rather than those of particular social groups invites responses related to one's own life and history rather than abstract generalisations about others. The potential for new engagements with different experiences is further supported by the provision of historical/social/cultural context and through the use of imaginative interpretive strategies that encourage an intimate and affective relationship with exhibition material.

My thinking about shared authority as I discuss it in practice here is informed by experience both in and out of the museum context. It is particularly influenced by my work as a writer and public historian with community groups and individuals who wish to make their experiences of, and perspectives on, social life, history and place visible. Through this work I have become keenly aware of the power of individual renderings of personal experience to engage the imagination of readers and invite them, as bell hooks argues for the power of critical fiction, into an empathetic relationship with experience that is not their own (hooks 1991: 57-58). My discussion draws on material from a research project called *Migration Memories* which tried out ideas for collaborative approaches to exhibiting Australian migration history by making exhibitions with community participants.¹ The exhibitions *were* the research rather than its outcome and I use examples from them to show methods of sharing authority in content, process and form. My intention in doing this is to both support my argument and suggest possibilities for future exploration raised by this initial experiment.

First my chapter provides theoretical and practical context. This includes my understanding of Frisch's 'shared authority', the background to and description of

the exhibitions, and an outline of the *Migration Memories* approach to creating an inclusive, dialogic migration exhibition. Some additional theoretical background to *Migration Memories* practice is provided with my description of the methods of working with agency and collaboration in the content and design of the exhibitions. This second part of the paper also identifies some of the issues that emerged through the research. I then offer some reflections on the *Migration Memories* collaborations with participants and discussions with audience members. In conclusion I highlight relevant learning from the research and areas for possible further exploration.

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 a 'new' museology in response to this (2007: 13). The new museology is one way of describing a body of practical and theoretical museum work which 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 (eg 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 ‘eradicat[ing] past and present inequalities in cultural representation of diverse peoples’(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’s interest in democratic and inclusive practice involves developing collaborative relationships with diverse groups and individuals and engaging diverse audiences. As Watson characterises it, the new museology is ‘community focussed’ (13).

My own position is that inclusivity is not achieved by the display of ‘other’ communities, but rather by exhibitions that encourage interaction across different positions – including those that may be regarded as mainstream. The appeal of ‘shared authority’ here is that it considers the specific agencies of the players involved and their interaction. It turns to personal complexity and what that reveals in contrast to representative simplicity and what that obscures.

Shared authority

Michael Frisch’s use of ‘shared authority’ in reference to both interpretive authority and authorship was taken up by oral historians in the 1990s and has continued to resonate in oral history discussion. What shared authority does so usefully is acknowledge what Frisch describes as both scholarly authority and the authority of ‘culture and experience’ (xxii). It highlights the agency of both positions and identifies the relationship between them as an egalitarian exchange between **distinct** kinds of expertise. As Frisch discusses it, this exchange may take place between historian and informant participant, or between a public presentation of history and its audience. What he suggests is that dialogue between scholarly and experiential knowledge taken 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’ (xxii).

Shared authority as exchange or dialogue between distinct expertises 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. The typical absence of the scholarly voice in interviews with ‘informants’ is highlighted in a 1993 article by Mary Stuart, ‘And how was it for you Mary?’ As an oral historian concerned with the impact of her presence on the interview, Stuart researched interviewee experiences of the interview situation. One narrator, taking this research to be a two-way affair, asked ‘and how was it for you?’ For me this is a critical aspect of honouring shared authority – we aren’t caring for the agency of the participant if we don’t respond as well as initiate – and further if we edit out our presence in the exchange. In the exhibition context, the absence of the curatorial voice as a particular and knowledgeable voice does not enable the agency of participants or audiences. It dishonours the intention of sharing authority by allowing museum knowledge to take up its usual and often oppressive omnipresent position.

Shared authority also opens the way for seeing the agency of participants in a complex and specific way. Those speaking from the position of experience of historical events or of particular cultural frameworks bring multiple perspectives to bear on the subject at hand. In *Migration Memories* I was particularly concerned not to reduce the migration history of participants to ethnicity. Obviously ethnicity was a component of the participants’ experiences and perspectives, but I sought them out as **individuals** whose stories connected with local periods and types of migration -

and I only made connections with ethnic organisations if those individuals led me there.

Migration Memories: the exhibitions

The *Migration Memories*' exhibitions were made in two regional locations. They were exhibited in their own localities and then shown together at the National Museum of Australia. The localities were Lightning Ridge – an opal mining town in northern NSW – and Robinvale, a horticultural town on the river Murray in north west Victoria. Both have rich migration histories and populations of around 7,000. A strong reason for the selection of these places was the enthusiasm shown by community organisations for participating in something which they saw could be of value to them.²

Resources for any activity in Lightning Ridge and Robinvale are modest. The exhibition made in Lightning Ridge was in a 1914 weatherboard cottage owned by the Historical Society and used as their permanent gallery space. The venue in Robinvale was a room set aside for child care in a very new leisure centre. The exhibition in Lightning Ridge included objects in museum cases. In Robinvale images of objects were predominantly used.

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 (McShane, 2001; Witcomb, 2009; Hutchison 2009). Specifically, the research explored ways of making an

exhibition in which the voices of the participants who contributed material, the curator, and members of the audience, could be part of an equal and inclusive ‘conversation’ across a variety of experiences and points of view concerning Australian migration history. The shared experience of the place of each exhibition provided a touchstone for this conversation and the idea of migration as an historical theme rather than a cultural experience provided the basis for seeing migration as something that resonates in the lives of all Australians. 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 a further move away from stereotypical ideas of migration as culture, artefacts used in the exhibition were chosen by individuals for their meaning to them, whatever their cultural dimensions.

Necessarily the project was 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 colonisation period to the present and looked for people interested in developing a story for display whether it was a story of a forbear or their own experience. With the Indigenous perspective there were 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 colonisation 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, ‘pioneering’ 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 panel text, 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 realisation 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 with Paula McKindlay and Jo Sheldrick. Lea Collins was the sound artist for both. The sound installations were a particular experiment in community collaboration and are the subject of a separate paper (Hutchison and Collins, 2009).

Methods of embedding shared authority in exhibition content and design

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 dried 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: Lighting Ridge*, Iona Walsh saw the importance of creating an exhibition that did not exceed person-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 that it was possible to respond to opportunities that emerged through the work in each locality. As it turned out, each exhibition included an unplanned additional element of display which 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 nor 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 or 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’.³ 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 recognisable as say ‘Lovelyn’s story’ or ‘Tory’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 location and its migration history, the research and the people involved. Most importantly 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 Iona 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.⁴

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.⁵ This concern reflects an expectation of the exhibition experience based on a particular tradition of display. My experience of watching audiences at the local venues was that those who were not schooled in museum attendance engaged freely with the material – usually heading first to a story they knew something of and then seeking others as they wished.

Presenting historical context alongside the personal story

Historical context and personal experience were presented side by side, using visual material and two sets of authored text which showed them as two forms of knowledge in side-by-side ‘dialogue’. In this way curatorial/historical authority and the authority of experience were embodied in the form of two characters – Mary and say, Jennifer. The idea was that this personal approach would create a non-threatening *and* non-patronising basis for audiences to enter the conversation from the point of view of their own experience. To achieve a balance between forms of knowledge which might ordinarily be seen in a hierarchical relationship, historical context was developed in *response* to the individual’s story and what was important to them. For instance in Dusan Malinovic’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.⁶

A typical beach paradise publicity image featuring a smiling young couple running hand in hand along the shoreline resourced 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 from 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.⁷

Using democratic interpretive strategies

In taking the theory of the 'dialogic' exhibition (Bennett, 2006: 63) into practice, *Migration Memories* used interpretive strategies that took their inspiration from the techniques that writers use to engage readers in the world of story. In this I followed hooks' discussion of critical fiction and Mikhail Bakhtin's theorising 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 image, distinct characters, direct speech, and clearly defined points of view within a narrative structure. These devices create a world which a reader may enter as an equal and intimate participant because it is embodied and material. It can be heard, seen, smelt, 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. (Hutchison, 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 had 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 28-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.⁸

The same sort of space was created by allowing tensions and questions, loss as well as hope, vulnerability as well as strength, to be part of each story. A particular example is provided in the late 19th – early 20th century story of Jennifer Colless'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 this migration included images of the Christmas cards Catherine sent to her grandchildren in Lightning Ridge in the 1940s and 50s. 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 the First World War and the decline of Germany's role in the opal trade.⁹

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, Joseph, Chris and Mele remembered their trip to Robinvale in this way:

It was a 10 or 12 hour trip from Wollongong to Robinvale 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 a bed for us three kids.¹⁰

In Joan Treweeke's story of the three different cultures which came together on her pastoral property in the colonial period, three objects found on the station provided the abstract '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 Robinvale Paula McKindlay used a curved panel shape as a reference to the River Murray and a detail from 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

(Hutchison and Collins, 2009).

Shared authority in 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 Robinvale 1936. Tory Pisasale in conversation with Mary Hutchison’. The distinct pieces of text were headed by our first names – Tory 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 san-serif curatorial text. Shading and colour 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 Gabor (known as Gabo) Nagy’s story, authored by him and his daughter Sheila, a vital official document was the medical examination form which showed the photo of him taken at the displaced person’s 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.¹¹

Another panel from Gabor's story concerned his journey from post-war 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'.¹² 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/author - as with Gabor's story. In Robinvale 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 Kay Grose's story of the colonial period in Robinvale, we sought advice from Aboriginal elders and, using a further graphic device, included some of their perspectives alongside what she and I had to say.

The examples I've used of the words 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 it was a matter of working with participants on what to keep, what to delete and what to prune. Generally we made broad decisions together, I then refined the text in response - always drawing on their words - and took the result back. Reading the text aloud and allowing time for participants to show it to others were both important to the decision making process. 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 honour the telling. As an example, John Katis'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.¹³

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 a bit like it to him one day and he said 'yeah, it's like a bloody magnet'. He was happy for it to be finalised in that way.

Perhaps not surprisingly shaping my own text as the distinct historian-curator 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.¹⁴

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 participants themselves. In the *Migration Memories* exhibitions I was determined to show the storytellers in their environments and in action – whether working with me or doing something else – not gazing at the camera as an illustration of themselves. This caused some controversy – some viewers felt that each story should headline a contemporary portrait of the storyteller and the National Museum introduction to the exhibitions used one of the very few smiling to camera images that existed. Alternatively, there are a number of examples of lively, agentic images produced through collaboration between individuals being photographed and photographers. The portraits of artists created for the Docklands Museum Sugar and Slavery exhibition are one 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/historical details – but this potential dialogue was not explored to the same extent as the personal story/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 and highlight the role of the object in telling the story. For instance with Lovelyn's old vinyl handbag from her flight to Australia from the Philippines we used: 'My uncle said to me, take only your handbag, don't look back, whatever you have in the cupboard, forget it'.¹⁵ Vinyl lettering was similarly used with Jennifer Colless's grandfather's opal cutting machine: 'Dad'd say, now Jen, I want half the thickness of a cigarette paper off that stone'.¹⁶ 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 which we could not include. Research by the National Museum revealed that its frame had been manufactured in America in the late 19th century. More recent modifications to it were typical of opal fields invention. For me, an important finding of the Migration Memories experiment with privileging personal experience and historical context as an alternative to cultural stereotypes, was that it opened up a way of reconnecting with the larger story of material culture. If I could do this work again, I would aim for showing objects as the holders of many stories and meanings and presenting these alongside each other. In Robinvale, the research highlighted objects as embodiments of personal meaning by using **images** of those selected.. A photographer was employed to take the 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 above is an example of this approach.

Another issue that added to the complexity of experimenting with the 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, certain 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 that she offered were things that 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 Rose's feather flowers are one such example. By the early 20th century, flowers made of feathers had become a craft object that Aboriginal people made to sell. They were a combination of traditional decorative use of feathers and European ideas of house decoration.¹⁷ Aunty Rose's mother was a maker of feather flowers and Rose had watched her make them. When I met Rose, she had recently tried her hand at the art and found that the skill came to her in the process. As an object that showed cultural adaptation in response to an oppressive new culture and for the way Rose had carried the knowledge of their making in her hands, the feather flowers were vital. They were also powerful beyond the exhibitions. Since their display in *Migration Memories: Robinvale*, Rose has made feather flowers for the

National Museum collection and for local display. People bring her bags of feathers and her making has become increasingly confident and adventurous.

[INSERT image 8.1 Aunty Rose display showing feather flowers]

Collaborations

The collaborative process was intimate but defined by the distinct positions of storyteller and professional researcher and curator. The storytellers were the experts on their history and place. I was the expert on history and making an exhibition. Each collaboration 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 – himself 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 *pakikipagsapalaran*, ‘finding my destiny’, with her marriage as one step in this.¹⁸ We tried a number of storylines before we arrived at *pakikipagsapalaran* 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 ‘mock-up’ 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 Lighting Ridge. This was immensely important and he was really pleased to come to the Canberra opening.

The research included documenting the process of the collaborative relationship. I interviewed the participants about their experience of the process at three different stages of our work together. 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'.¹⁹

When professional expertise has 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, most recorded some time of confusion, but did so with a sense of their 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.²⁰

My first understanding 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 generally experienced as better than 'yes Mary, no Mary'.

I also kept track of my own experience of working with storytellers. There were many examples of the intersection between the social and the personal in shaping experience. For instance in shaping Tory's story we focused on his father's experience. His mother was an equally strong character but her experience was that of a woman, and while sensitive to it, Tory was not so connected with it. When I talked with Tory's sisters, Nella and Grace, at the exhibition, I also became aware of how different their experience as second generation women was from Tory's. If I'd worked with one of them, the story would have taken quite a different direction.²¹ There were also experiences of exchange with individuals that showed how collaboration across difference can move people into new positions. For instance, I was nervous about how Dusan 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.

Often collaboration between professionals and participants is concerned to maintain the status quo rather than allow the inevitable impact of interaction between ‘you’ and ‘me’. For Dusan, *Migration Memories* opened up the possibility to look back over his life. For Aunty June and Uncle Roy Barker the invitation to think about 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,²² he made a point of saying that he 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 next chapter in the making of participants’ stories – and a new chapter in their authority. The website uses the image of Sothea’s clothes with his text ‘These my only clothes I had to wear on the boat, I keep them to remember my journey’.²³ 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.²⁴

The collaboration with individual participants, as well as with the community organisations who 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, for Robinvale Neighbourhood Centre they were an opportunity to do something for Robinvale, for Tory Pisasale it was an opportunity to continue a reflection he had already begun. Lovelyn’s participation was part of her determination to contend popular conceptions about her migration experience. Her growth in confidence during the

process was a growth in capacity to do this. When I emailed her about discussing her story in this paper 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’.²⁵

For me the experience of the collaborations has the same satisfying memory of swimming well in uncharted waters; of developing relationships with people whom 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 researcher and visitors were in an egalitarian relationship; not the satisfied/dissatisfied customer position *vis a vis* professional success or failure, nor the ‘have your say’ or ‘tell us your story’ approaches which are both essentially patronising. 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 dialogic way intended.

An ambitious intention which 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 conversation.

Capturing audience experiences at the local exhibitions included observation and 'listening in' to conversations (Leinhardt and Knutson, 2004) between visitors, but largely involved taking 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 democratising historical understanding by taking shared authority into the method of public presentation. 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 relearn their community.

It's like I think you have walked into a huge 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 to something else - to the bigger picture - was. ²⁶

The local exhibition contexts had a relaxed, familiar territory feel which was conducive to lingering 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've mentioned preconceptions about exhibitions were few and far between. By contrast the exhibition at the National Museum was in a small space within large

open spaces whose exhibits interpreted broad themes of Australian social life. Responses to the questionnaire generally reflected the difficulty of viewing a specifically located exhibition in this context. Across the locations, the conversational approach provided insight into the the complexity of audience response. The frame of mind of the moment – ‘is there somewhere to eat 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 revolve around stereotypes, but sometimes there was a struggle to make them fit. A number of responses used the phrase *you just don’t realise*.

[INSERT image 8.2 visitors]

Conclusion

The Migration Memories exploration of shared authority methodology, in the use of character and narrative, and through collaborations between museums and creative arts practice, shares features made visible in other exhibitions, notably Mason et al in this volume. Here I highlight some of the questions raised through the research and offer some brief reflections.

A central issue for the collaborative activity was what as museum curators we see as an unequal tension between scholarly authority – which I embodied– and the authority of experience embodied by the individual storytellers. Despite detailed decision making most storytellers could not envisage the final exhibition and so

‘shared authority’ in the finished product was limited. But my experience was that the storytellers were far less concerned about this than I was. Their concerns centred around such things as the value of telling the story and how family and friends would respond to its public expression. They saw themselves as playing a key role in the content and seeing how it ‘turned out’ was more like a critical moment in the exchange of skills and knowledge than something in which they had no part. For all participants the exhibition was satisfying as a realisation of their story and its value.

There are two points to make here. One is that Migration Memories insisted on detailed attention to the way interpretive forms and devices shape meaning. Every decision about the form of the local exhibitions was made with reference to personal and local meanings as understood through the collaborative process. The other point concerns the nature of the project: small in scale, largely independent, able to respond to particular circumstances as they emerged on the ground, and based on detailed collaboration between curator and designers.

The research partnership with the National Museum brought generous financial support, status, and best practice protocols to the relatively flexible ship that was Migration Memories. Perhaps there is value for large institutions in approaching community collaboration through support for local activities and guest exhibitions rather than through organisational change. The power of place as a frame for bringing different experiences and perspectives into relationship with each other, was only partly realised. There was a tension between showing place as particular and tangible to those who are familiar with it and making it visible in the national context. In hindsight it seems obvious that presenting the local as **central** when ‘away from home’, requires a shift in focus. Suggestions include approaching

this through design or, through an exhibition concept such as using objects to represent the different knowledges 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 colonised by 'community engagement' - which has come to resemble a marketing strategy more than a democratic process. I have argued for a shared authority approach to community collaboration in museum practice because it engages across difference; across skills, knowledges, cultures, viewpoints; making connections and reacting to these in a complex and rich way. 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 what it produces reflects exchange.

An ongoing focus in my academic work, and in my work as a social history curator, has been the capacity of personal experience, and the distinct expression of that experience, to create connections between diverse positions and histories (Hutchison, 1999; 2009).

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 '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 exhibition, I usually had to ask directly what they thought about the authored text.

⁴ Introduction, panel 1, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 2006.

⁵ Visitor responses, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 26 August 2006, conversation 8.

⁶ Dusan Malinovic, panel 2, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 2006.

⁷ Sothea Thea, panel 2, *Migration Memories: Robinvale*, 2007.

⁸ Sothea Thea, panel 1, *Migration Memories: Robinvale*, 2007.

⁹ Jennifer Colless, panel 5, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 2006.

¹⁰ Maamaloa-Fine family, panel 2, *Migration Memories: Robinvale*, 2007.

¹¹ Gabor and Sheila Nagy, panel 1, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 2006.

¹² Gabor and Sheila Nagy, panel 2, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 2006.

¹³ John Katis, panel 3, *Migration Memories: Robinvale*, 2007.

¹⁴ Dusan Malinovic, panel 3, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 2006.

¹⁵ Lovelyn Miglietta, vinyl text, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 2006.

¹⁶ Jennifer Colless, case text, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 2006.

¹⁷ Personal communication, Michael Pickering, curator, National Museum of Australia, September, 2007.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Aileen Paguntalan for providing me with information about the role that *pakikipagsapalaran* plays in Filipino women's migration stories.

¹⁹ Len Arnott, interview 2, *Migration Memories: Robinvale*.

²⁰ Aunty June Barker, interview 2, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*.

²¹ See the discussion of Tory Pisasale's story on the *Migration Memories* website

<http://rsh.anu.edu.au/migrationmemories/html/robinvale/pisasale2.htm>

²² Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), National Indigenous Studies Conference, Canberra 29 September – 1 October, 2009.

²³ <http://rsh.anu.edu.au/migrationmemories/html/robinvale/thea1.htm> See also Hutchison, M. 'The social life of a denim jacket' in *Journal of Australian Studies*, 35, no. 4, December 2011

²⁴

http://www.facebook.com/posted.php?id=742806531&share_id=156686289581&frag#!/profile.php?id=742806531 20 October 2009.

²⁵ Personal communication, 12 November 2009.

²⁶ Nezaket Schulz, visitor response interview, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge*, 4 September 2006.