

Translations: experiments in dialogic representation of cultural diversity in three museum sound installations

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Abstract

Using the example of three experimental museum sound installations, this paper discusses the translation into practice of the intention to make meaningful connections between diverse social positions and experiences. We use the term 'dialogic' to theorise these interactive intentions and show them at work in the content, development processes and form of the sound installations. Our discussion is framed by the collaboration between the authors across the disciplines of museum studies and creative practice.

Key words: agency, collaboration, cultural diversity, dialogic, sound installation.

Introduction

This paper concerns the translation of theory into practice. It starts from the intention to show cultural diversity as an interactive experience rather than a static display of cultures. Drawing on museology and creative practice, it argues that the practical realization of such a dialogic intention requires a dialogic methodology. In this it is concerned with the processes of exhibition making *and* the selection and arrangement of material through the formal devices of composition and design. Our subject matter consists of three experimental sound installations which were developed as components of exhibitions about Australian migration history. Within the frame of the exhibitions, the installations were designed to convey a sense of cultural diversity in action in a particular place and through the lens of personal experience. They were made on the basis that sound is an integral component of exhibition design that may complement, extend, counter and interact with other elements. Each installation was the result of collaboration between us in our work as composer and sound designer (Lea Collins) and writer and social history exhibition curator (Mary Hutchison). The first installation, *Bonegilla Voices*, was made in 2003 for the National Archives of Australia.¹ It offered us an initial opportunity to try out a collaborative, participatory and imaginative approach to making a museum sound installation. Although not planned as such, *Bonegilla Voices* was a precursor to the other two installations, *Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge* and *Migration Memories: Robinvale*. These were both made in 2006-7 as part of an Australian Research Council Linkage Project into ways of making exhibitions about local Australian migration histories.² A defining characteristic of this research was its interest in exploring dialogic approaches to exhibition making. Critical assessment of these has provided a framework for us to extend and theorize our approach to museum sound installation (Hutchison 2009).

Theoretical frameworks

Our discussion, and our practice, is informed by James Clifford's use of Mary Louise Pratt's term 'contact zone' to describe the power relations implicit in museum collections (Clifford 1997: 192). His focus here is the interaction of colonial encounters and how the inequalities of these may be turned around through exhibition practices that start with the agency of those whose material has been collected as part of the colonial enterprise. He suggests that this is a matter of development processes that go further than 'consultation and sensitivity' to 'active collaboration and sharing of authority' (Clifford 1997: 210).³ Through his discussion of the New Guinea Sculpture Garden created at Stanford University in 1994, he also highlights the importance of

such agency being visible in and as part of the experience of the exhibition itself (Clifford 1997: 195-7).

Our discussion also takes its cue from Tony Bennett's use of the term 'dialogic' in literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin's sense (2006: 63). Bakhtin argued that the novel is dialogic because it is a form within which meaning is made through interaction between 'voices' that are essentially in dialogue, such as that between speaker and listener. In the case of the novel the voices are those of the characters and narrator, and of the reader/listener who makes sense of this dialogue by engaging with it. The voices of a dialogic text may also be seen as its elements; producing meaning between them and opening it out to further meaning making. (Klages 2006: 135-42). As Bennett explains it, a dialogic exhibition is concerned with the 'multiaccentuality' of meaning. It does not operate through a 'controlling' curatorial position but across a number of sites, in the 'to and fro' movement that is characteristic of the dialogic (Klages 2006: 63). Like the novel in Bakhtin's analysis, it includes audiences in this interactive process of meaning making. Bakhtin further specifies 'polyphony' as a form of multivoiced text in which speakers, including narrators (or curators) and listeners, are 'on the same plane' (Vice 1997: 112).

Bakhtin's democratic dialogics, as well as Clifford's 'contact zone', resonate in museum studies discussion of relationships between exhibition participants and contributors, and audiences. For example Ruth Phillips identifies 'multivocal' exhibits as one form of exhibition resulting from active collaboration between curators and communities. For her, collaborative exhibitions are part of the landscape of authority-sharing practices within a 'dialogic paradigm' (Phillips 2003: 156-70). In a discussion of the potential of museum exhibits to encourage interaction and 'dialogue' with audiences, Andrea Witcomb works with the idea of the museum itself as a 'contact zone' and explores the interactivity this requires beyond the superficial use of so-called 'interactive' technologies (Witcomb 2003: 128-64).

Our own research reveals a clear convergence between discussions of the 'dialogic' in the 'contact zone' tradition of agency, collaboration and dialogue, and those concerned with texts and meaning making, but we also hold to a sense of their distinction in terms of process and form. Following Clifford we understand agency – the power of individuals to act or create effect – as central to egalitarian dialogue in which people are directly involved. Drawing on Bakhtin we also work with the autonomy of voices in the text as a way of *representing* agency and collaboration and, through this, of inviting audiences to engage from a position of equality. Our premise here is that representation does not involve a transparent relationship between intention and outcome. Rather it is a dense and complex production of effects in which the representational devices and strategies of any particular medium are as much charged with meaning as is content. We contend that attention to the selection and management of meaning-making devices within a particular medium is as critical to achieving an 'interactive' exhibition – one that speaks and listens - as attention to the process of working with its subjects and their material.

In summary, our discussion concerns several separate but interconnected layers of dialogic intention and practice. First, Clifford's sense of the contact zone and what is required to refigure it more democratically underlies our approach to making exhibitions that generate connections across different cultures, experiences and understandings. Secondly, and in support of our cross-cultural intentions, we identify and argue for approaches that support the agency of exhibition participants and audiences, and encourage dialogue between them as active speakers and sense makers. Here our paper deals specifically with authority sharing between participants – for example between professionals and community members. Thirdly, as we argue, it is necessary to make agency and interaction visible in the exhibition itself, as a basis for response in kind from audiences. Here we pursue the idea that an open and multivoiced or 'multivocal' (Phillips 2003) text supports agency and encourages 'contact' or dialogue, in Bakhtin's terms, 'on the same plane'. In this case the 'voices' of the text encompass the range of its elements and include but are not restricted to actual speech or voice. Our argument here is that the dialogic does not represent itself but must be threaded through the signs and devices of the medium in question. We are discussing museum exhibitions (rather than, say, novels) and, within this form, that of museum sound installations. This third dialogic layer also concerns the agency of sound itself as an active component of meaning making within

the exhibition and, in addition, the agency of the sound installation's own compositional elements or 'voices'. The fourth layer concerns the making of the sound installations as a collaboration between us, Lea Collins and Mary Hutchison, as our real selves, and across the disciplines of museum studies and creative practice.

Working in the framework of these layers, our focus is on the question of why and how we translated our dialogic intentions into the content, process and form of the sound installations. To this end we provide context to the sound installations within the frame of exhibitions of cultural diversity, and the use of sound in museums. We also provide a reflective account of our methodology. Our point is that in the museological endeavour to exhibit material, is itself charged with meaning, and that to engage wide public audiences in those meanings, what practitioners such as graphic artists, fabricators, photographers, sound designers, writers *do* is critical to achieving intentions. The capacity of practitioners to reflect on their practice and how it works in relation to intention is also vital.

Organization of the discussion

The first part of the paper locates the intention to exhibit cultural diversity in an interactive way in the genre of migration exhibitions in Australia. It also frames the intentions for the sound installations to be dialogic in form in the wider context of museum sound installations. It further identifies precedents to our interdisciplinary collaboration across museum studies and creative practice and the specific professional experience we bring to bear on this in making the sound installations. The second part of the paper shows how we translated dialogic intentions into practice through content development, recording, editing, composition, design and installation. This discussion is staged through our distinct (and overlapping) roles in the process. It is introduced by a brief description of the exhibition setting in which each installation was heard. We conclude with some reflections on the particular characteristics of the sound installations as examples of collaborative creative practice in museum settings.

The form of our paper is itself dialogic and includes several different 'voices'. We speak together in a shared academic voice and in separate sections of the paper in our professional voices as writer/curator and sound designer/composer. We also include community and professional responses to the sound installations. These comments are not intended to illustrate our discussion but to give some feeling for the experience of the installations. They are placed at regular intervals through the paper and are not introduced. As an exception, we start with an excerpt from the Lightning Ridge sound installation (a conversation recorded between two Hungarian participants) as an example of the to and fro 'translation' that takes place in exchanges across cultures.

Gyorgyi: yes, well we were just talking about our first impressions of Lightning Ridge and the interesting mining stories.

Elizabeth: *Mi azert jottunk mert hallottuk ha valaki opalt talalt az kiviszi az agyat a luk melle es ott alszik, nagyon erdekes* [giggle]

Gyorgyi: [giggle] *Hat el tudom kepzeln. Vigyaz a business-ere.* We both, actually we both talked about... Elizabeth talked about the business side of it, because she is in the opal business. I am here because I wanted to get away from the big city rush, I used to live in Sydney, but I would not go back to Sydney or any big city any more, no, not after living in Lightning Ridge. (Collins and Hutchison: 2006)

Part one: contexts of practice

It was lovely coming along the verandah and hearing the voices. I thought, oh, there's people inside talking.⁴

The installations in the context of Australian migration exhibitions

Bonegilla Voices and the *Migration Memories* sound installations were made in the well established context of Australian migration exhibitions but they were not made in the predominant tradition of such exhibitions. Typically, Australian migration exhibitions turn on the idea of multiculturalism and the wealth of different cultures migration has brought to Australia since the Second World War. As Ian McShane (2001) argues, this owes much to the relationship between explicit policies of multiculturalism in 1970s Australia and museum interest in representing migrant cultures. As well as celebrating and thus highlighting cultural difference, the emphasis on 'communities' in multicultural policy has often resulted in migration exhibitions featuring a series of ethnic groups – expanding with new arrivals - and the presentation of migration as an undifferentiated and uncontested 'community' experience. Cultural diversity in this context concerns the 'contribution' of ethnic 'others' to the mainstream (Hage, 1998) and migration itself becomes a singular event rather than a long and complex history that includes dispossession and exclusion as well as changes for the better. Alternatively, the National Archives *Bonegilla* exhibition and the *Migration Memories* research exhibitions were informed by an interest in showing migration as an historical and heterogeneous experience – something with common human ingredients but understood and felt in a multiplicity of ways in relation to the conditions of time and place. They sought to contextualize the experience of migrants in the events and policies that produce and regulate migrations over time (McShane 2001: 125-8) and to show migration as productive of new engagements and social configurations (Hutchison 2009, Witcomb 2009).

Bonegilla Voices was made as a special National Archives addition for the Canberra showing of a regionally made touring exhibition about the Bonegilla migrant training and reception centre. Bonegilla was established in 1947 by the Commonwealth Government of Australia for the first intake of post-war migrants. It was situated at an army camp near Wodonga in rural Victoria and was the largest and most longstanding of a number of similar centres. 'Bonegilla' in many ways stands for the arrival experience of Australian immigrants in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. The National Archives' brief was to use material from Commonwealth Government records to show the policies and process of immigration at the time; how they framed Bonegilla itself and the migrant experience there. The intention was to highlight the Archives' collection of personal immigration records and include some personal memories of Bonegilla from Canberra residents. Bonegilla's use as a reception centre for newcomers from many different countries also provided the context for looking at it as a place of connection between cultures rather than through the lens of 'the Greeks', 'the Dutch' and so on. This was the particular role of the sound installation.

The *Migration Memories* research exhibitions were made as a deliberate exploration of an historical and intercultural approach. The aim was to show a variety of points of view within and on local migration history from the colonial period to the present, including those of Indigenous people. People were invited to participate as individuals who had experiences and histories that connected with main migrations into their region. They were not invited to represent an ethnic group. Exhibitions were made and shown in Lightning Ridge, an opal mining town in the central north of New South Wales, and Robinvale, a horticultural town on the River Murray in north western Victoria. They were also shown together at the National Museum of Australia. The sound installations for each local exhibition endeavoured to create a sense of the experience of migration and the particular cultural diversity of each locality.

The wider context of audio interpretation in museum and heritage settings

The second edition of *The Oral History Reader* (Perks and Thomson 2006) includes articles that highlight two particular trends in the use of oral material in the public interpretation of history. Anna Green discusses an experimental local history exhibition held in 1995 at the Waikato Museum, New Zealand, designed around selections from oral history interviews (Green 2006: 416-24). Toby Butler and Graeme Miller discuss Miller's 2003 public art installation along a motorway in East London – a composition drawing on oral history recordings and environmental sounds (Butler and Miller 2006: 425-34). Typically audio representation in museums is most

concerned with personal story as historical experience, while public art sound installations work with voices and sounds to create a sense of place. Again typically, the former is associated with the instructional intentions of museums, the latter with imaginative interpretation.

At its best, the evocative approach to interpretation has the capacity to draw an audience into the experiences of others in a way that supports the agency of both the material and the listener. The conventions of creative representation assume that meaning is created rather than pre-existent. They work through the senses and emotions, through play and interplay, through metaphor and image. They invite an audience to participate rather than receive. In Miller's installation, *Linked*, the auditor moves along the route of the transmitters, listening and looking; engaging with a place that is visible and invisible:

I pace up and down the bridge. It is cold: I dig my hands into my coat pockets. Listen, I look. I stare in at the people slowly driving their cars. They don't know what is going on, what I am experiencing. They haven't got a clue. They don't realise that they are walk-on parts in the play today. They are driving over the ruins of a community (Butler and Miller 2006: 426).

Miller achieves this effect by mixing voice and sounds and mixing and repeating them so that they are layered and textured. Butler notes distinct voices and coherent stories appearing in the mix (Butler and Miller 2006: 429) but the difficulty in this form (though not this instance of it), is that voices may lose particularity to become a general effect. The artist's voice on the other hand, if not actually present, is assumed and credited –and accepted as playing a determining role in the effect.

Oral history presentation in museums sets out to honour the narrator's voice and story by retaining the order of the excerpt and not interfering in any way with its sound as a recording. However, it often does not achieve the agency or effect of intimate story telling that may be intended. In the form that invites audiences to 'pick up the handset' or 'press the button' to 'hear more about the old tram', the teller is positioned as illustration rather than agent. Each old voice remembering a tram, a war, the way something used to be done, becomes less itself and more an information sound bite with the stamp of authenticity. Erasing the interviewer (on the assumption that it will enable direct contact between speaker and listener) often further deadens the voice by erasing the 'live' context of the telling.

Alternative oral history approaches include using recorded memories to directly interpret items on display as at the Kangaroo Valley Pioneer Farm Museum in New South Wales. In this case Anna Jarrett, a professional story teller, invited the narrators to develop their memories as stories (Butler and Miller 2006: 19-25). They took a determining role in shaping material as well as actively contributing to the interpretation. Listening to them you can hear a confidence that comes from an awareness of a wider audience and the value of what they have to say to the Museum. The combination of oral history material with elements of public sound art in museum settings is also increasingly common. In some cases it reflects little more than the availability of sophisticated technology. In others it shows a real cross fertilization between the traditional oral history approach and the traditional 'arty' one. Miller's public artwork in London is such an example of the drawing of voices of experience into the art installation framework. Another example, that brings sound art to the museum intention to interpret the experience of history, is the site interpretation at what remains of the Bonegilla migrant centre. The entrance to the purpose-built interpretive centre is flanked on one side by a mural of ocean waves. Voices, in various languages, overlap, come forward and recede. One, speaking in English of the decision to come to Australia, comes regularly to the fore while the others continue in the background (Thylacine and Sound Environment 2006).

Bonegilla Voices and the *Migration Memories* sound installations are located in the same 'combination' space as the Bonegilla migrant centre's *Listening for Home*. They were made as expressions of Australian migration experience, rather than as evidence of it. Their first role was to complement and open up the experience of the exhibition in an imaginative way - as public art sound installations may open up the experience of place. In the context of their respective exhibitions they evoked the (multi)cultural dimension of place and individual experiences of migration and cultural connections. Following the dialogic form, the idea was to

create each piece as a lively interchange of experience, not static but always in the making and open to the listener's experience. In the tradition of oral history they recognized the power of personal voice and elements of story but, like the Kangaroo Valley model, sought to work with these in terms of the position and agency of the tellers, the curator, and the audience.

An interdisciplinary collaboration – museum studies and creative practice

Museologically our discussion is contextualized by current themes in exhibition practice: the relationship between museums and members of the public who have a particular role in their collections and exhibitions; approaches to managing the complex issues of histories and memories that inhere in exhibition topics and objects; and audience research that constructs visitors as active 'knowers' (Freire 1972) rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Our interests in creative practice are located in audio art as exemplified in Australia by Ros Bandt and other artists who contributed to *The Australian Sound Design Project*.⁵ The recent anthology, *Hearing Places* (Bandt, Duffy and MacKinnon 2007) represents a wider body of European work relating to sound culture and the sonic experience of place. Our interests are also informed by our experience in working, in our different capacities, in theatre, radio and community development. Both authors have extensive experience in the dialogic processes that are central to making artwork with communities (eg Bolitho and Hutchison 1998; Pitts 2002).

As a discussion of collaboration between these disciplines, our paper is part of a growing field of such interdisciplinary activity. In the UK, the Arts and Humanities Research Council identifies cross disciplinary inquiry between researchers and makers as an important underpinning of the Beyond Text research programme.⁶ In Australia, the Museum of Sydney has provided a strong lead in relation to specific collaboration between curators and creative practitioners (Carter 2004: 72; Witcomb 2003: 156-64). One of the practitioners involved in the establishment of the Museum is historian and writer, Paul Carter. His sound work, *The Calling to Come*, is located at the Museum entrance. As you walk through the door, the voices of a man and a woman brush past you. They exchange words in English and Eora. The words play with connection and misunderstanding between the first colonists and Indigenous people. They are fragments of meaning and attempts to catch meaning. Museum of Sydney collaborations, as well as Paul Carter's interest in 'material thinking' (2004) and his work with sound, are important reference – and departure - points for our own research collaboration.

Overall our discussion speaks for collaboration between museum and creative arts activities. For our purposes, what creative practice most vitally brings to the museum are strategies that engage the imagination. On the basis that imagination enables us to stand in another's shoes - to empathize - such strategies have the capacity to bring subjects and listeners together into the same territory and on the same footing (hooks 1991: 57-8). Imaginative strategies do this through affect; by 'evoking', 'moving', 'touching' - producing visceral responses. They also have the capacity to produce new 'senses' of experience by unyoking elements from certain relationships and drawing them into new configurations (Bhabha 1991: 62-3). In other words, representational devices that use strategies from creative practice are critical to the hybridity that is implicit in the dialogic (Bennett 2006: 62-3).

Hearing those voices is what I like a lot. It's a pleasure to walk in and hear them.⁷

Part two: making the sound installations

I liked the sound of the voices – the sense of dialogue. It animated the text of the exhibition. It gave the exhibition another dimension – it didn't repeat or replicate it. The text [in the exhibition] was always about Mary and the person whose story it was but the audio allowed me in. I thought I was part of the conversation. I liked the sound, the viscosity of it – the sound of the voices. You could hear them thinking, it wasn't background crowd noise, they were trying to communicate. They were working to create the audio in the space.⁸



Fig. 1 Entrance to Migration Memories: Lightning Ridge, Lightning Ridge Historical Society Gallery. Photograph: Ursula Frederick, 2006.

The settings in which the installations were heard

The *Bonegilla Voices* (in Canberra) and *Migration Memories* (at Lightning Ridge and at Robinvale) exhibitions consisted of panels using text and images, and displays of objects. The National Archives' exhibition included wall panels, framed images from an extensive photographic collection, and displays of facsimile documents that audiences were invited to examine. It also included objects from private collections and the memories of individuals in text form. The venue was a typical but intimate exhibition gallery. The *Migration Memories* exhibitions consisted of individual free-standing configurations of display panels detailing personal experience in historical context. Personal objects were included as part of each individual display. At Lightning Ridge real objects were displayed in cases but at Robinvale evocative images of objects were part of the panel design. The text in these exhibitions was distinctly authored by the curator and the individual 'story tellers'. In Lightning Ridge the venue was a weatherboard cottage built in 1914 and used as the Historical Society Gallery [fig. 1]. In Robinvale we used a space designed for child care in a modern Leisure Centre [fig. 2]. The National Museum venue for the display of both Robinvale and Lightning Ridge exhibitions was a space for temporary exhibitions within a much larger area of permanent Museum displays.

Translating dialogic intentions into practice - overview

Bonegilla Voices and the *Migration Memories* installations took up the dialogic intentions we've outlined at several levels of practice. As sound installations they were designed not to *illustrate* certain parts of an exhibition but to combine with visual and written elements to create the exhibition. Sound was heard as evenly as possible around the exhibition and set at an audible but not intrusive level, so that it was part of the whole exhibition experience. Each piece used individual voices, often in conversation, sometimes in song, speaking in a variety of languages and variously accented English. The material was drawn from specific places and specific personal experiences. These grounded and embodied elements were central to representing



Fig. 2 View of Migration Memories: Robinvale, Robinvale Leisure Centre.
Photograph: Jo Sheldrick, 2007.

agency and 'dialogue' in composition and design. In addition, working towards agency and authority-sharing in the recording process meant caring for our agency as professionals as much as that of the people who contributed their personal experiences. We saw these principles as the basis for engaging audience members as equally self-determining. When someone spoke back to the audio – 'she's wrong about that!' – or hummed bits of song that were part of it as they made their way around the exhibition, we thought we'd got something.

In the *Migration Memories* research, the idea of 'conversation' was used to hold together dialogic intentions and practice. Conversation expresses the 'to and fro' and 'give and take' (Bennett 2006: 63) implicit in the dialogic. As a form of communication it has an open texture. It invites listening and response. A 'good conversation' involves listening to ourselves as part of attending to the exchange, and contains the potential for engagement and movement between the territories of self and other along the lines of Elspeth Probyn's use of de Certeau's 'geography of the possible' (Probyn 1993: 143-5). In the making of all three sound installations 'conversation' also had a quite literal dimension in terms of content and process. In the first place it offered a way of reworking the typical 'oral history' voice and recording voices so that they might be heard as distinct, engaged and speaking on their own behalf. The interaction of conversation is a lively alternative to the conventional 'suspended in space' sound of the edited interview. It invites response, operates as a familiar sign of empathetic connection and is simply pleasurable to listen to. In the second place, the sound of conversation provides a way of representing interaction across cultures. Generosity and inclusiveness is evident in those conversations in which people move between their first language and another for the benefit of someone not able to speak the first. Thirdly, we saw conversation as creating openings for participants to direct the material collected. Rather than responding to an interviewer as interviewees, they could talk with each other – or as some preferred – interview each other.

In terms of form, all three sound installations were structured around extremely short extracts of recorded conversation interspersed with varying but short periods of silence. This created the effect of voices drifting in and out of a larger conversation. It also allowed the sense of specific 'characters' to emerge. In this way the sound installations as heard embodied the

process of translation that is implicit in all meaningful engagements between 'you' and 'me' and quite explicit in conversations that negotiate language and culture. They also highlighted the collaborations that had produced the material, and invited audiences to keep the conversation going.

We noticed Mary's voice... You usually think that the role of the oral historian is to shut up but Mary's exclamations and comments on the tape bring it to life.⁹

Content development: Mary Hutchison

With a background as a writer for performance with some experience in using the medium of sound, I approached my role in making the sound installations in the way I might approach developing a script. My first step in the making of each installation was to develop a broad concept based on what I heard as the sound metaphors of cultural diversity in a particular place.

In talking with people who had stayed at Bonegilla, there were several things that resonated most strongly for me about their experience. One was the extent to which Bonegilla was a world of worlds – a place in which places and languages collided. There were also the sounds of Bonegilla as an instrument of the Government's immigration programme evidenced by the well-remembered Bonegilla public address system. When I searched for official evidence of its operation in National Archives files, I found a 1947 letter from the Secretary of the Immigration Department requesting that a gramophone record of *Advance Australia Fair* be sent to Bonegilla.¹⁰ Although it is only in recent years that *Advance Australia Fair* has become Australia's national anthem, it was a symbolic sound that we felt we could use.

At Lightning Ridge I was also struck by different languages and accents in conversation with each other as a defining sound of culture-in-place. But it was not the same sort of 'hotspot' as Bonegilla – more an everyday way of life which locals see as a critical characteristic of their collective identity.¹¹ And as well as the different languages and accents you might hear any day on the main street, there was the story that features in many encounters - swapped between locals and offered to visitors - of coming to Lightning Ridge on the off-chance and never leaving.

Robinvale's cultural mix sounded rather different to me. A strong and distinct cultural sound – that of Tongan church choirs – was a very obvious part of the place's soundscape. It also connected directly with the Tongan family story featured in the exhibition. Other personal histories in the Robinvale exhibition also had sound 'objects'; a love of opera, a passionate memory of particular lines of the Greek national anthem. My concept here, as with Lightning Ridge, was to hold these particular sounds in the wider frame of voices of Robinvale. As a result of working with Robinvale Secondary College these were mainly young voices and the topic of conversation was special objects that had relevance to individual migration experiences. But while this concept seemed to work intellectually, it had an uneven and complicated sound. The forms as heard were disparate. They didn't lend themselves to integration with each other. Most problematically, sounds with specific meaning for individuals had an abstract dimension. If part of place by association, they were not *of* place. Another complexity in Robinvale was that for various reasons my work with the young people did not get beyond the 'interview'. The question - answer format across a cultural divide that was as much to do with age as migration experience felt most uneasy to me in relation to my interest in participant agency. Alternatively, a recording made for the project by a teacher with his drama class produced material in which young people's voices were confidently centre stage. The Robinvale installation did not fully work in the way we wanted it to, but as an investigation it reinforced our understanding of the value of specific grounded and embodied elements in creating the agency necessary for dialogic texts.

The only negative for me was the audio. I would like to have been able to hear more of the people's stories.¹²

Approach to composition and design: Lea Collins

The role of a sound designer in sound installations like *Bonegilla Voices* and *Migration Memories* covers several areas: collection and preview of material, editing, producing rough cuts, discussing modifications and finally, realisation and installation. As Bandt describes it, 'the

design of the sound, its placement, the direction of emission from source to auditor and the temporal arrangement of its many parts are the business of the sound artist' (Bandt 2001: 20).

My background is in radio, in engineering live sound and in electro-acoustic composition or computer music which emerged out of the classical electronic music composition studio. I've found my milieu as a practitioner in audio art and radiophonic investigations - an area in which Australian artists have been prolific. Andrew McLennan's 'topography' of Australian sound art describes an eclectic practice - from ABC Radio National programs like *Radio Eye* and the now defunct *Listening Room* to '...the radio violin fantasies of Jon Rose, the semi-scripted, semi-improvised performances of Virginia Baxter and Keith Gallasch, the phonic critiques of Fran Dyson and the philosophy performative performance manifestos of Virginia Madsen...' (1994: 317). During the 1980s and 1990s, programmes and activities like these, along with new media arts residencies offered by ABC Radio and a vibrant community broadcasting sector, positioned Australia as a leader in artistic sound experimentation.

In my collaboration with Mary, imaginative compositional work with voice has been a central element. I'm interested in both semantic and abstract use of recorded voice and have been influenced by artists like the dadaist Apollinaire whose play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* 'expanded the use of language beyond the conveyance of semantic meaning through wordplay, accent, timbral change and phonemes (Lane 2006: 4). Cathy Lane identifies categories of composition using spoken word in terms of a 'primary split ... between works in which a semantic discourse is dominant and works in which a more abstract discourse is dominant' (Lane 2006: 4). As a composer I work on both sides of the split - often within a single work - and this is reflected in both *Bonegilla Voices* and *Migration Memories*.

As well as listening to voice as a composer, I listen as a radio producer, an audio engineer and sound designer. All of these require an aural imagination but there are important differences and subtle aspects to each of these disciplines. The function of the voice in radio is often described as intimate, as 'listening in' on a one-to-one conversation. When community radio and ethnic language broadcasting developed in Australia in the 1980s, a huge variety of ordinary people began to present programmes - no more faux BBC Australian accents! Years of panel operating and editing programmes in languages other than English taught me to listen 'behind' the words - to pauses, to inflection, to the musicality of language as well as to the meaning of what is being said. As an audio engineer I work towards vocal intimacy as well as towards 'broadcast quality'. This means recording and broadcasting a voice so that it does not sound recorded or as if a microphone is involved.

Another important influence on my listening to voice has been work as a theatre sound designer for group-devised community theatre where content using stories told by many voices is often created through improvisation. This requires a reflexive practice which owes much to the method of educative praxis developed by Paulo Freire (1972) and other radical adult educators. In this listening style the focus is on the distinct expression of the individual. Small, signal pieces of material are selected as cues to the characters and their world. As such they create the form of the work.

My work mixing live sound for bands and theatre where shows are regularly worked into a new space means I'm also very concerned with optimizing material for specific spaces. Bringing sound into museum and gallery spaces can be problematic because they are usually constructed for the display of visual material. Physical aspects such as reflective qualities of building materials, height of ceilings and size of rooms, create an acoustic signature for every particular space. Quality of playback equipment also has to be considered as well as audience pathways and other exhibition material. All of these impact on mixing, audio mastering and remixing.

My intentions for *Bonegilla Voices* and *Migration Memories* in relation to my own and Mary's interests, concerned sonic quality, audience experience, respect for participants in recording and editing processes, and composition of recorded speech. I wanted to move away from typical 'boomy' exhibition sound which often becomes tedious for both gallery attendants and exhibition viewers. I like to use lower volumes to invite people to stop and listen - loud sound in itself becomes tiring and disengaging. And with this material I was particularly interested in people's experience 'in the space' and in exploring the 'edge of perception' threshold. I was also aware that the audio was one of several dimensions of the exhibition. I wanted it to be capable

of standing alone but integrated as part of the whole exhibition experience. Overall, I wanted to enable the audience to experience it easily and seamlessly.

My impression was that visitors were so delighted to hear other languages in the exhibition space that they felt they wanted to say something to me when I was there [in my capacity as exhibition designer] – the type of audio possibly broke down the sense of a barrier, as if the display was including them... Acoustically it worked really well in the National Archives space – you could hear the voices clearly as you moved around, but not dominating.¹³

Recording and collecting – voice and collaboration: Mary Hutchison

I invited people to record material with me on the basis that they would find it stimulating as well as fun. For *Bonegilla Voices*, I asked potential participants if they would be prepared to 'remember' Bonegilla with a friend or family member in their language of origin and in English. I explained my interest in conversation in translation and encouraged them to go about this in a way that was comfortable to them. Everyone who participated created something different. One participant brought her children along to ask her questions about Bonegilla and translate her answers, while an older couple slipped naturally into reminiscing together. One couple got together with friends and wrote and performed a script based on announcements on the loudspeaker system. This was a quite unlooked for addition and set up a further level of discussion with those involved about how this material could best be used as part of a whole composition.



Fig 3 Recording at Opal FM, Lightning Ridge. Clockwise from front: Mary Hutchison, Dora Garcia, Edith van der Chijs. Photograph: Jenni Brammall, 2005.

I continued this approach in Lightning Ridge with particular help from a Migrant English Class and the Transcultural Community Council. The broad topic for conversation was the story of arrival. Some participants interviewed each other, some started with greeting each other; there

was a sense of rehearsal and performance in many of the approaches. Although I was one part of the conversation on some occasions, on many I was simply the facilitator of others conversing [fig. 3]. There were also pieces that weren't recorded in the form of conversation. For instance, one man simply felt more comfortable writing down his memory of the day he travelled to Lightning Ridge, in English and in Czech, and then reading each. By chance, Aunty June remembered and sang a Sunday School song that the Wangkamura people had brought to the Brewarrina Aboriginal mission.¹⁴



Fig. 4 Tongan Christian Fellowship Choir, Robinvale. Photograph: Jo Sheldrick, 2007.

In Robinvale, Tongan church choirs were key participants. Members facilitated the recording of a church service and prepared an additional performance for us despite the pressures of harvest time. In return we were able to provide them with their first CD, but participating was also of importance to them in demonstrating their capacity to contribute to the activities in a place they now see as home. As the younger generation say 'Robinvale is on the Tonga map'. [fig. 4]

Recording and collecting – voice and quality: Lea Collins

The palette of recorded material from which I worked included conversations in community radio studios in Canberra and Lightning Ridge, at a classroom in Lightning Ridge, at a neighbourhood house in Robinvale and at people's homes. I gathered additional material such as period gramophone recordings and organized musicians to perform specific musical pieces. I also went to Robinvale to record atmospheres and the Tongan choirs.

In considering additional material I was concerned about the quality of sound in relation to our intentions. For example how could the experience of being on the street in Lightning Ridge and catching the sound of conversations in many languages be conveyed? Could we honour the feelings of displacement and shock of arriving at Bonegilla in barren rural Australia in the fifties when you'd only experienced war-affected European cities; or the feelings of dismay at first sight of Australian dress codes - footy socks and singlets in the pub - when you were wearing a good Italian suit? How could we create *the idea* of the Bonegilla camp announcements on the public address system instead of attempting a pseudo-realistic reconstruction? How would we

incorporate sounds grafted onto a new environment - choirs, anthems and opera – as well as sounds of first experiences of Australia such as the daily detention centre routine of singing along with Australian soap opera theme music, as in Robinvale?

To set a tone that would create the idea of *Advance Australia Fair* I found a musician who was confident to improvise and play 'in the style of', on an old period piano - not a pristine orchestral instrument. This was an alternative to the scratchy gramophone record sound and evoked the era of post-war migration rather than engaging problems of authenticity. It was also open to memory and interpretation including the assimilationist intention of its original use. For similar reasons I recorded an operatic aria in rehearsal with a vocalist and accompanist to suggest a sense of a lovingly tended memory and the personal meaning of opera performed at *La Scala* transplanted to rural Victoria. The decision to use community radio facilities for recording participants' voices was made because the studio environment focuses on the voice in conversation and creates a sense of vocal intimacy. Such community locations minimize the overwhelming presence of equipment and maximize the potential for participants to feel at ease. Another important aspect of the recording process was that participants were familiar with the recordists – Mary and I. From my point of view the combination of zealous attention to detail and comfort for participants in the recording process was the key to collecting the quality of voice – the voice overheard on the street corner – that we wanted.

I hear my daughter in there!¹⁵

Towards editing and composition: Mary Hutchison

I had a strong sense that to create the feel of conversation it was necessary to use fragments of the voiced material we had collected rather than complete sense-making chunks of it. Fragments of story suggest that experience is in the moment and in the making rather than drawn from a personal well of fixed knowledge. They also draw you in, in the tantalizing way that snatches of overheard conversation do. In the gaps between the fragments there is room for the listener to infer, to imagine - to put together their own sense of an experience whether familiar or not.

Another important editing and composition issue we worked on together concerns the feeling or 'affect' of listening. When discussing editing, Lea and I would say to each other, 'I love the way she says that', not, 'that's a good piece of information'. We might similarly focus on something that resonates in ways you can't explain, such as Nezaket's words, 'Homesickness, I believe is not one thing. It can be a smell, a sound...' (Collins and Hutchison 2006). The way she says it, so intensely, I can hear her homeland in her voice. What I'm interested in here is the power of evocative representations - those you feel and describe with your body - to engage. And not only to engage, but include.

Editing and composition, design and installation: Lea Collins

In selecting 'fragments' I listened for distinct character and the sort of intimacy in which exhibition-goers might hear echoes of familiar conversations, or imagine themselves in the place or as part of the conversation. We discovered that we could create *the idea* of story, people and conversation by using very small grabs of material. We joked about how the compiled pieces just kept getting shorter and shorter. In selecting material from conversations in languages I didn't speak, I was guided by the participants' general interpretation, along with the sound and rhythm of the voices, rather than exact translation. Another consideration in the selection process was our own agency in the process in collaboration with participants. I managed this by retaining Mary's presence in the recording process - for instance through reference to her in conversational incidentals. We were similarly interested in giving the material a sense of being created in real time and place so I worked counter to the prevailing editing orthodoxy of 'tightening up' – for example retaining occasional stumbles and interruptions.

In assembling the selected material into an overall form, I considered the basic musical elements of pitch, rhythm, tempo, and timbre or tone. At this point the voices almost became the instruments of the piece and issues of musical structure came into play – melody, gesture and motif. The Robinvale material presented a particular compositional challenge as it

contained a lot more pieces of music than the other collections. We tried to use this music to do the work of memory but it just sounded as though we were programming pieces of music. We found that although we were interested in a form that did not rely on voice in conversation, we had to use it to retain the sense of personal experience and engagement that was basic to our intentions.

The space of installation was a particular issue for the *Migration Memories* pieces because they were first installed in small local venues and then combined in an open plan area of the National Museum. I designed each piece specifically for each site and then recreated them as an interwoven whole. This included varying the spacing and timing of selections – in effect varying the times when the particular characters entered. Elements of the audio texture were modified so that the two works could exist side by side and so that each could be heard distinctly but in relation to each other. Inserting longer pauses and creating a loop of five slightly different versions of the remix assisted audibility in the lively National Museum environment.

One of the things that continues to interest me is the way the installation environment itself, as an embodied, sensate experience, can extend the experience of the work (e. g. Gumbrecht 2004). Responses in Lightning Ridge suggest that hearing voices in conversation in and around the weatherboard cottage gallery had an additional resonance. The local reception of the Lightning Ridge sound installation was particularly strong – participants and visitors alike seemed to fall in love with it.

I love that little song. Lovely to listen and read at the same time. You suddenly think, oh I've heard that before.¹⁶

Conclusion

The sound is so airy.¹

In this paper we've argued for interactivity in exhibiting cultural diversity and for interactivity in the form of exhibition presentation through the use of dialogic texts. Within this, we've insisted that the dialogic has a practical dimension and discussed it from the point of practice rather than effect. We have done this on the basis that 'how' something is done contributes to the meanings it creates and as part of this have argued implicitly and explicitly for collaborations such as ours across the disciplines of museum studies and creative practice.

In showing 'how' we translated our dialogic intentions into the practice of the sound installations, we have identified a number of key ingredients in relation to development processes and form within the medium. The sound installations are in effect 'plays' or short performances improvised around the intention to show cultural diversity as an active and personal engagement in particular places. But they are not dramatizations. They use voices of experience in the oral history tradition and sounds that refer to place and experience. They were formed through the juxtaposition of recorded voices and other sounds; a cast of distinctly voiced characters whose interaction creates a world into which an audience might step - aurally. The relationship they create between performance and audience is an open one that assumes the agency of the audience. They were also made in a tradition of practice and collaborative endeavour that connects them with the Museum of Sydney's project to bridge history and art, and work with the 'invention' (Carter 2004: 72) of meanings that both practices engage. As Witcomb (2003: 162-4) documents, Museum of Sydney exhibits made in this vein have been criticized for their hybrid nature by art and social history curators. She supports the view that they appeal to a small elite and are inaccessible to general museum goers (Witcomb 2003: 163). Our sense is that this may be because they tend to look inward on meaning making, rather than outward in a way that invites participation. In *Bonegilla Voices* and *Migration Memories* our dialogic intention drove the work to look out; to work with perceptions and perspectives that were not our own and that populate the world outside the walls of the museum. Our investigative focus was the agency of exhibition subjects and components, and their capacity to engage and move audiences to speak back.

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Notes

- ¹ Hutchison was contracted to curate a complement to the Canberra exhibition of Albury Regional Museum's touring exhibition, *From the Steps of Bonegilla* exhibition using material from Commonwealth of Australia immigration records held by the National Archives and information gathered from the experience of Canberra residents. See Hutchison, Mary (2004). 'Accommodating Strangers: Commonwealth Government Records of Bonegilla and Other Migrant Accommodation Centres', *Public History Review* 11.
- ² Migration Memories: creating and analyzing collaborative museum representations of Australian Migration Histories, Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project based at the Research School of Humanities of the Australian National University and in partnership with the National Museum of Australia (NMA), 2005-2008. Hutchison played a key role in designing and carrying out the research.
- ³ Michael Frisch's concept of shared interpretive authority (1990), developed in the context of public history, also informs our understanding of the agency of those whose stories and creations are the material of exhibitions. See <http://rsh.anu.edu.au/migrationmemories/>
- ⁴ Migration Memories research notes, conversation 6, Lightning Ridge (LR) responses, 20 August 2006.
- ⁵ <http://www.sounddesign.unimelb.edu.au>
- ⁶ AHRC, October 2007, Beyond Text: Performances, Sounds, Images, Objects Programme, Research Programme Specification. <[http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/research/sfi/ahrCSI/beyond_text_sounds_voices_images_...>](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/apply/research/sfi/ahrCSI/beyond_text_sounds_voices_images_...)
- ⁷ *Migration Memories*, Conversation 6, LR responses, 2 September 2006.
- ⁸ *Migration Memories*, NMA responses 10 December 2007.
- ⁹ *Migration Memories*, Conversation 8, LR responses 19 August 2006.
- ¹⁰ Records of the Immigration Department, National Archives of Australia, A434/1 1949/3/25375.
- ¹¹ Internationality is one of the main ways in which Lightning Ridge publicly defines itself. In 2005 the Transcultural Community Council received a Living in Harmony grant from the Federal Government to purchase flags of over 50 different countries to fly on Harmony Day in honour of the origins of the around 7,000-strong population.
- ¹² Pers.comm., Jo Sheldrick, 20 September, 2007.
- ¹³ Pers.comm., Iona Walsh, 4 December, 2007.
- ¹⁴ 'Mission' is the term used for all settlements established for Indigenous people. Brewarrina was managed by the New South Wales government.
- ¹⁵ *Migration Memories*, Conversation 2, LR responses, 27 August 2006.
- ¹⁶ *Migration Memories*, Conversation 10, LR responses 22 August 2006.
- ¹⁷ Migration Memories research notes, conversation 9, LR responses, 21 August 2006.

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