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Chapter 10

Vicarious Heritage: Performing Multicultural Heritage in Regional Australia

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The heritage tour began at one of the high points of Australia's Great Dividing Range. Situated at the top of 'The Crossing', the tourists looked down over the steeply inclined federal highway, which weaves its way through dense vegetation and steep cliffs to reach the peak before crossing into the vast agricultural hinterland beyond. Visitors walked around the immaculately manicured gardens for which the viewing site and the local City of Toowoomba are well-known. Gathered on the viewing platform, tour participants politely admired the spectacular vista of the Lockyer Valley down below. Interrupting their thoughts, the performer-guide asked them to imagine the site 170 years previously, and proceeded to describe a significant and deadly confrontation between white settlers and Indigenous Australians. Few participants were previously aware of the conflict, which was rarely discussed in the city. Many on the tour were unsure how to respond.

The tour formed part of Toowoomba's well-known annual Carnival of Flowers (discussed elsewhere in this collection by Andrew Mason). The heritage tour had been created to diversify the tourist experiences for visitors to Australia's 'Garden City' in a collaboration between the local University of Southern Queensland, regional government and industry partners. The Carnival of Flowers is a major event in the commercial and social life of Australia's second largest inland city, with over 100,000 spectators to key Carnival events each year. In addition to attracting tourists, the celebration is the premier expression of civic pride for local residents. Repeated annually for many decades, it represents continuity, stability and a sense of cultivated agrarianism from which residents draw great pride.

The heritage tour centred on the gregarious persona of a performer-guide and sought to provide a marketable product of interest to visitors and locals alike. Within this mandate, it explored how people perceived the city of Toowoomba and their place within it. The city's architectural heritage of sandstone civic buildings and wide streets is well-known, but there has been little exploration of how locals relate these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century buildings to the contemporary community. Rather than re-affirm a legacy of wealthy white landowners, we hoped to recapture the city's ethnically diverse past and to connect this to an environment that has frequently proved violent and unpredictable. In so doing, we sought to reintroduce a sense of vulnerability and difference as a continuum in the city's history, and to explore how this might be viewed as something other than negative.

Regional Heritage

The heritage tour sought to explore perceptions of community belonging and difference in a city that has undergone rapid demographic changes in the past decade and a half. From the start of the creative process, this led to a productive tension between the commercial needs of industry and the research interests of the University. The project team encompassed myself as a historian, Janet McDonald (a colleague at the University, co-editor of this collection and specialist in regional arts), the regional council with oversight for the Carnival, a tourism consultant, the local theatre, the bus company running the tour and the performer-guide himself. The potential difficulty posed by this range of partners working on a relatively contained project was mitigated by a clear commitment to the project vision: for a marketable tour that complemented the Carnival of Flowers and that explored ways to transform the experience of heritage and community.

The tour was focused on the figure of a performer-guide, who would interact with participants around a loosely scripted narrative. Participants would periodically disembark the bus, which drove around the city centre and its environs on a predetermined route. It was important that the performer-guide (who was a local man active in amateur theatre) was comfortable with the historical narrative and competent with the deployment of his personal experience within the wider context. This was especially important if his gregarious persona was to connect appropriately the issues of Indigenous massacre, forcible exclusion of non-whites and deaths by natural disaster. The script was produced through an iterative process of historical research, script writing by McDonald and a series of meetings with the performer-guide, theatre professionals, McDonald and myself. With time, the process expanded to include industry stakeholders and various rehearsals on the tour bus. Crucially, the performer-guide's capacity to remain credible and in-character throughout the tour was central to whether he could meaningfully connect discontinuous heritage sites into a coherent narrative able to transform community preconceptions.

Participants were invited to reflect on their experiences at the end of tours in semi-structured interviews with volunteer research assistants from the University. In addition, each participant selected a number of 'feeling words' that best represented their emotional response to the tour. This technique was developed by Jan Packer (2011) to capture emotional engagement in heritage, and focuses on the important feelings people have at the end of a museum or heritage experience. For this project, it also enabled exploration of how the 'possessive intimacy' (Lowenthal 1997, cited in Jackson 2008: 375) associated with local heritage could be disrupted while still being experienced as an authentic reflection of community.

The city of Toowoomba offered an ideal locale in which to explore disruptions to accepted notions of heritage and inclusive community. Situated approximately two hours from the state capital of Brisbane, it has a steady number of visitors who seek the tranquillity and cool temperatures associated with the city. At the same time, its population is self-consciously 'regional', encompassing a quiet disdain for cosmopolitan attitudes in favour of championing

agriculture, social stability and rural economic development. The city acts as the unofficial capital for the Darling Downs, a region of well over 75,000 square kilometres that is among Australia's most fertile agricultural land.

The Toowoomba area was settled from 1840, in a process of frontier conflict that encompassed the dispossession and death of many of the area's Indigenous Giabal and Jarowair peoples (French 2009). Over time, and as part of a pattern common in the Australian interior, a 'squattocracy' of agricultural landowners forcibly took possession of large tracts of land. By the time that Toowoomba was officially declared a municipality in 1860, the region's agricultural potential was clear and farming was developing apace. However, such farms' profitability relied on the presence of marginally employed workers drawn from socially excluded ethnic groups. Toowoomba's affluence increased through the early twentieth century at the same time as the country's White Australia policy removed many non-whites and prevented the further arrival of others. The city's inhabitants progressively re-imagined themselves as an affluent all-white city, which legitimately represented the pinnacle of Australia's agricultural elite. The region experienced little demographic change until a visibly different population returned in the late twentieth century, as Toowoomba became a designated settlement centre for refugees and the University attracted increasing numbers of international students.

In 2011, the Toowoomba region experienced serious flooding that killed 16 people. The event understandably shocked and horrified many, who had been told that 'Toowoomba will never flood' (McWilliam 2013). Such advice demonstrated a widespread amnesia of the fact that the city was built on a former swamp on the top of a mountain range. In common with much of regional Australia, the city had embraced a notion of agricultural stewardship in which the land could be inexorably tamed for the progress of the farming and national community. As with elsewhere in Australia, this vision of continuous stewardship of land tended to marginalize outsiders and emphasized cultural whiteness as the community norm. Migrants had settled in regional Australia in large numbers, most notably after the Second World War. However, there was an unmistakable expectation that they would rapidly accrue whiteness to the point when they would assimilate into the community. The recent arrival of visibly different refugees and international students raised important questions for the city's future imagining of itself, as well as the role of its heritage and imagined past.

While not hostile to new arrivals, communities in regional Australia experience what has been usefully summarized as a wariness caused by geographical 'isolation, lower levels of essential services, population outflow to the cities, lower skill levels, unemployment, and [...] a distinctive social structure' (Grimwade and Carter 2000: 35). Together, these elements form a particular framework in which any re-imagining of the local community must occur. Museum and heritage sites in regional Australia are frequently focused on a hardy settler past, with a strong local focus in terms of sites' vision and content. Given the long distances, sites predominantly rely on local volunteers to maintain and preserve cherished community narratives. Within this context, there is little interest in the histories of ethnic minorities (Grimwade and Carter 2000). Where recognition of culturally and linguistically

diverse communities occurs in heritage spaces, it tends to position people as noteworthy for disrupting accepted narratives, rather than being core to the history of regional Australia.

Scholars have noted the importance of local histories to communities' sense of self and belonging, frequently contrasting them to the 'vapid candy floss' of commercialized heritage (Royle 1998, cited in Jackson 2008: 363). Local histories are positioned as producing new knowledge that connects with broader trends, rather than the 'candy box nostalgia' of demarcated heritage destinations where actors dress in costume (Jackson 2008: 371). Local history is vibrant in Toowoomba, with a local history association that conducts occasional small tours and has a regular newspaper column and radio segment. The city's obvious architectural heritage is a source of civic pride, which is often the focus for community engagement in local histories. With only moderate demographic change during its European settlement, community members have invested significant emotions in their local histories.

There is a recognized body of literature regarding the benefits that can flow from community engagement in local heritage (Grimwade and Carter 2000). Notwithstanding this, there is a tendency to focus on the tangible heritage around which community mobilization and engagement is easiest. Yet, without 'appreciation of what is being conserved [and what is not], cultural heritage sites potentially become meaningless, and understanding of human history is lost' (Grimwade and Carter 2000: 34). It is notable in Toowoomba, as elsewhere, that those sites that have been preserved are the beautiful sandstone civic buildings and wartime monuments. Within the city, the network of Japanese laundries has been lost, the state's first synagogue demolished and the former Chinese market gardens have been 'returned to nature' as a Bicentennial Bird Park. This is partly a reflection of the emphasis on demarcated heritage sites, but also reflects the local community's capacity to imagine vicariously.

People's relationship to place reflects deep emotional investment in spaces that represent tangible connections between present and past communities. It was particularly important for us to re-find a sense of Toowoomba's spaces as ethnically diverse and to reflect on the social habits that centred on the spaces. The historical presence of (non-Indigenous) visibly different others has been forgotten, with the result that the city's contemporary visibly different population has been positioned as new, historically abnormal and potentially unsettling. I argue that the careful use of performer-guides may offer one way to re-imagine stories and sites of community diversity and inclusion.

Heritage Performance

Heritage performance has been defined as 'the use of theatre and theatrical techniques as a means of mediating knowledge and understanding in the context of museum education' (Jackson and Rees Leahy 2005, cited in Kidd 2011: 22). This broad definition captures a range of heritage performances and draws attention to the human stories that connect

historical sites and objects (Kidd 2011). One of the great strengths of heritage performance lies in its capacity to challenge notions of a single historical truth and instead to recognize that historical meanings are conferred through fluid social interactions (Garden 2006). In this manner, the heritage experience can be understood as a unique interaction between site, performer-guide and tour participants.

Although the tour was designed for visitors to Toowoomba, a significant majority of the tour participants were from the local region. The fact that people lived in the heritage spaces every day is important, as was the fact that they were participating in the tour as part of the celebratory Carnival of Flowers. These were not value-free heritage spaces, and participants knew the subsequent histories of what the sites had become. The performer-guide was not crafting an isolated narrative, but had to overlay people's own cultural knowledge of site and place. Many in the local community feel great pride in the city's early multi-ethnic past, citing examples of commercially and politically successful migrants to demonstrate Toowoomba's inclusive heritage. These everyday experiences of the spaces need not mitigate the potential impact of the heritage tour. Indeed, powerful affective experiences can resignify commonly experienced heritage spaces and contribute 'in some meaningful way to transforming the people themselves' (McCarthy and Ciolfi 2008: 250).

The sites and spaces through which the tour moved were inherently social, with heterogeneous meanings that had to be recognized. The tour continued from the viewing platform overlooking the site of Indigenous massacre through the Bicentennial Gardens (and former Chinese market gardens) past heritage buildings, including the former gaol, courthouse, theatre and train station. From the start, we sought to use these well-known spaces to foster recognition for a multicultural heritage that would help to normalize the city's diversity. As Ballantyne argues, heritage 'should seek to uncover, deconstruct and acknowledge the contests and struggles that characterize most social spaces, rather than shy away from potentially controversial or problematic issues' (Ballantyne 1998, cited in Markwell et al. 2004: 465–466). As one stakeholder commented, 'there's nothing funny about dying of typhus in 1888 because they ate stuff from the Chinese markets [...] But I think hysterically funny when you find out the typhus came from them using what [the performer-guide] called "you-poo"' (Stakeholder Interview 1). An industry partner's request to frame the story through this reference to human faeces and the performer-guide's decision to discuss the Chinese presence (and absence) through light-hearted banter are symptomatic of the difficult balance between accessibility and empathy in this debate.

The performer-guide's persona was of a gregarious larrikin (a well-loved Australian stereotype of a boisterous and irreverent male). The original plan to have a sequence of historically specific personas was replaced as the tour developed. This posed some difficulty to the performance of the tour's content, since the performer-guide now offered a representation of Toowoomba that was not always critically reflective. The language available to the larrikin character also structured how knowledge was communicated. Yet, it also positively influenced most participants' willingness to engage in good faith with his persona, and many found that he 'made it fun' (Participant Interview 8), 'light-hearted and

entertaining' (Participant Interview 9) and that 'just the overall friendliness of the tour was what made it the best for me' (Participant Interview 10). The stories that engaged people the most were those with which they had most in common. For a number of participants, their interaction with the performer-guide and tour became a dialogue focused on emotional reminiscence. Opportunities to interject family memories were frequently taken, as participants interrupted the performer-guide with their personal stories of presence in local space. A typical example was the participant who recalled, 'my great-grandfather ran a boarding house opposite the railway. There was a lady on the bus whose grandmother's parents, her great-grandparents ran a boarding house not far from my mother's [laughs]' (Participant Interview 2).

Importantly, meaning-making was a social process in the heritage spaces, drawing on the tours' own particular social dynamics. The more confident participants felt able to interact directly with the performer-guide, both in the bus and in the heritage sites. Participants (and the performer-guide) who reminisced and articulated memories did so in the belief that they would be supported by others in the group, who shared similar collective memories of the past. Their story-sharing risked excluding other participants, such as middle-aged and young adults who felt marginalized by the emphasis on direct reminiscence (Stakeholder Interview 3).

The larrikin persona encouraged many participants to share their views because they were confident that they understood the discursive rules around this framework of Australian identity. Thus, one participant confidently disclosed that 'my great-grandparents were some of the early pioneers in Toowoomba [and that she had attended] because of my roots' (Participant Interview 2). Yet, these are typical of 'preferred models of identity', which tend to be emphasized in communities' heritage engagement (Newman and McLean 2006: 60). Such models are based on contemporary understandings that fashion the past as a reflection or equivalence of the present. The sociability meant some participants were less confident in sharing stories that may have challenged dominant narratives and that risked being misrecognized in the group (Participant Interviews 5 and 14). Less well-known stories of the city's non-white past were listened to respectfully, with a typical response being that 'I've lived in Toowoomba for a long, long time, I did not know about the Japanese population' (Participant Interview 5). An exception to this polite indifference was the interest shown in the story of Hunter Poon, a turn of the century Asian Australian cricketer who went on to play nationally. The story positioned him within a quintessentially white Australian sport and praised his service in the First World War. Positioning Poon in this way emphasized select entry points through which the community could choose to grant a privileged access to whiteness, but it did not normalize his difference.

In many ways, participants' hesitation to identify with a multicultural heritage as their own was understandable and site-specific. The tour's stop at the train station, for example, prompted prolonged reminiscence of soldiers leaving to fight in World War II, with many participants anchoring their discussion in the poem that was read of an Anglo-Australian woman knitting socks for her husband and sons (Participant Interview 5). Participants

enjoyed the performer-guide and bus driver's impromptu singing of war songs. Yet, it was also the site from which German and Japanese Australians were sent to internment camps or deportation. This fact elicited only comments that further othered them by marginalizing their Australian-ness (such as, 'I knew about the Germans' as opposed to the 'German Australians'). The emotional engagement of the war era was amplified by the performer-guide's decision to share his personal war stories, after which people interjected with 'their' stories of the war. The performer-guide himself felt uncomfortable discussing the deportations and preferred his own family history in wartime. The specific persona chosen for the performer-guide may have created this equivocation, given the centrality of his biography to the character. In so doing, his own story became central to the groups' "emotional mapping", and thus perceptions of the authenticity of the story [he told were] aided by the authenticity of the feelings and memories engendered' (Kidd 2011: 30).

The larrikin performer-guide offered one way to develop the emotional connectivity needed to explore whether the heritage sites were authentic parts of the community's past. His tendency to insert his own stories into the landscape clearly positioned him as a contemporary local. This meant that his performance could not bear witness to a lost or invisible heritage; it also limited his capacity to perform past interactions with space. Rather, he acted as a representative of the community, retelling its own history to itself. He had to be an insider to be credible in this regard, but in so doing he was caught in the awkward complicity of historical amnesia. The script sought ways to accommodate vicarious imaginings in heritage spaces by weaving the continuity of cultural diversity in public spaces through emotional stories. In the performance, however, such imaginings were through the referent point of the white performer-guide's personal biography.

Community understanding of what constitutes authenticity is complex and multi-layered according to context. Often, community is most satisfied that the narrative is an authentic reflection of themselves when they have been involved in the project design, scoping and storying of the tours (Perkin 2010). This was beyond the purview of this project, not least because of the absence of deported non-whites. Yet, the community still had to be able to insert themselves into the narrative articulated by the performer-guide, viewing it as an authentic reflection of the past; albeit one that incorporated and involved them in previously unknown elements. As Rickly-Boyd (2012: 129) notes, while sites 'provide tourists with an historical narrative of place, tourists ultimately form their own narratives about heritage sites through their experiences with its landscape'. Importantly, the same process is involved in a performer-guide who acts without a formal script or fixed character.

Vicarious Heritage

Heritage provides an important site to explore regional society's perceptions of contemporary multiculturalism. The widely accepted paradigm for regional heritage perpetuates an imagined juxtaposition with the supposed cosmopolitanism of metropolitan Australia. This

has tended to emphasize regional narratives of struggle and dominance over nature, incorporating a hierarchy of legitimate identifications with local space that centre on Anglo-normativity. The rendering of a contested past into a normalized landscape of everyday interactions has thus created a sense of uncontested whiteness within regional communities (Guthrie 2010). The passage of our tour sought to offer an alternative iteration of the landscape and a re-reading of common relationships to place.

Regional heritage can exist only through regional communities. This draws attention to the influence of the ‘thick seams of power’ and values that bind communities (Waterton and Smith 2010: 8). Regional Australian heritage focuses on the white, masculinized artefacts of the struggling settler, drawing attention to the aesthetic heritage of rural homesteads and a celebrated national identity as a precariously triumphant underdog. Participants emphasized the importance of this process of social recognition. Some felt cheated that the tour had not focused on buildings (Participant Interviews 6 and 10), while others argued that the references to natural disaster were inappropriate in a heritage tour (Participant Interviews 10 and 14). Such instances do not deny society’s capacity to recognize multiple narratives in heritage sites, but do emphasize that any discursive or performative creation ‘heritage’ relies on community recognition (Waterton 2010).

The absence of socially recognized heritage relating to non-white Australians highlights this quandary. The dominant community narratives did not recognize the Bicentennial Park as a site of multicultural heritage. Similarly the Empire Theatre was discussed extensively by participants in relation to white sporting heroes, firefighters and visiting royals (all part of a national iconography), but was conceptually disconnected from the erased synagogue across the road. The naturalized assumptions that underlay the community’s lack of recognition were based on the racialized, gendered and sociocultural norms of regional Australia. The consensus on legitimate Anglo-normative heritage re-affirmed locals’ security in their sense of self and community, legitimizing certain imagining of the city and discrediting others (Waterton and Smith 2010).

The centrality of the performer-guide’s storytelling tended to fold historical time in on itself during the tour, as his personal experience created a sense of historical equivalence. In contrast, participants demonstrated a sense of detachment from the erasure of the Asian Australian presence in their landscape. Various sites of Asian presence were pointed out during the tour, with a focus on recounting the sites’ human stories. The content ranged from the nineteenth-century Chinese Australian businessman Hock Singin to the ‘golden triangle of cleanliness’ formed by the cluster of Japanese laundries. The long-standing presence of Chinese shepherds and Japanese laundries was initially treated as a curiosity; however, by the end of the tour, some participants expressed appreciation that the tour had taken time:

telling stories about local people from the variety of different backgrounds ... umm ... and their businesses and how they were engaged in the community ... umm ... I thought that was all really wonderful.

(Participant Interview 11)

The focus on personal stories by the performer-guide opened a space for vicarious reflection. By the end of the tour, participants commented that ‘we heard about the ... umm ... cultural diversity of the area [...] So it wasn’t looking at just a couple of old buildings, it was much more than that’ (Participant Interview 11).

Wartime tensions proved an important catalyst for engagement with the Other. Tension existed in discussions of the Japanese laundries and their owners’ removal during the Second World War. The emotional resonance of the tour (especially those aspects that evoked death, such as the First and Second World Wars) can provide a framework through which tourists can engage sites. Echoing this, participants recalled that ‘the most moving part was when we went to the train station and they told us this story about the mothers and their sons [going to war]’ (Participant Interview 4). In so doing, and in the context of the White Australia policy, emotions have the capacity to ‘transform symbols of national weakness and vulnerability into symbols of national renewal’ (Selwyn 1996, cited in Breathnach 2006: 113). This was not the case for the largely older tour participants. The majority of participants discussed deportations in terms of the war with Imperial Japan and family stories of loss at the hands of the Japanese. With more time, better community engagement would result in stronger narratives of diversity that intersected with local war stories.

It is in this context that the performer-guide offers pathways for recognition of people’s presence in the landscape. While understanding formalized discussion of heritage requires literacy and education as well as insider knowledge of local histories, understanding people’s stories does not. It was obvious that the most actively engaged tour participants were those who knew that their personal interjections would be recognized within accepted narratives of regional and national identity. Thus, stories of fire burning through the theatre were experienced as ‘just very moving’ (Participant Interview 4). Moreover, the most common feedback from the ‘feeling words’ focused on reflexive emotions connected to the thought-provoking nature of the stories, as people wanted to feel ‘the story of Toowoomba’ (Participant Interview 2).

A performer-guide cannot alter the broader social structures that influence community recognition of heritage. Yet, there is a potential to open pathways for emotional empathy with those who live in the community but are imagined as separate from it. As one participant recalled, the performer-guide ‘got very emotional when he was reading the poem about the sons and I think that then flowed through to the rest of us’ (Participant Interview 5). It was this emotional response that allowed people to ‘see a different side of Toowoomba’ (Participant Interview 18) and to reflect ‘about the town you drive by everyday [...] and you just don’t know’ (Participant Interview 14). The conceptualization of civic landscape as infused with multiple stories, produces spaces ‘where our abstracted, homogenising national stories are called into question through the daily telling and living of our unique and overlapping individual stories’ (Lehrer 2010: 283). It is in this capacity to imagine and relate empathetically that performer-guides’ utility may lie.

Australians have not engaged in a national process of sustained reflection on the consequences of the White Australia policy. National discussions around historical injustice

(such as the Stolen Generation or former child migrants) have focused on victims rather than broader social culpability. Where there are no victims, there appears to be no need to reflect carefully on the ongoing contemporary erasure or amnesia of the past. Yet reflecting on the past as a part of daily life offers one means to formulate more inclusive societies. As Sennett (1998, cited in Lehrer 2010: 269) argues, ‘remembering well requires a social structure in which people can address others across the boundaries of difference’. In this way, emotional engagement with the stories of the past in the heritagescapes of the present can create a conciliatory space for reflection.

Scholars have asserted across various contexts that ‘[e]motional narrative informed by cultural habit and experience are what connect people’ (Kearney 2009: 218), and emotions continue to act as a powerful means to engage the past and the present. Nostalgia offers one particularly powerful emotional framework through which to engage with heritage. Neglected sites of tangible heritage can evoke nostalgia or recognition that an Other was previously present in the space. Yet nostalgia ‘is also convoluted or entangled time, a kind of prospective memory uniting visions of the future based on present perceptions of past conditions’ (Hodge 2011: 120). In this way, nostalgia structures contemporary cultural values to formulate an idealized sense of community. This need not be focused on the past, and much local engagement in heritage reflects a desire to come together and share in the present (Mydland and Grahn 2012: 587).

Participants’ capacity to engage reflexively about their emotional reactions to multicultural stories was central to the tour’s potential impact. Reflecting on a general lack of sadness regarding the removal of Asian Australians, for example, would offer powerful insight into contemporary society. Put differently, a participant’s potential ‘regret’ that the White Australia policy removed many Asian people from Australia can be folded into and structured by a ‘hope’ that Australia’s future was sufficiently inclusive to move beyond the traumas of the past. Using a performer-guide to articulate stories and narratives offers the means to target the emotional responses that were famously termed ‘hot authenticity’ by Selwyn (1996).

In this manner, and through stories, difference becomes less central than a sense of the vulnerability that all humans share. Given that the current backlash against multiculturalism has been characterized as focused on control of local spaces, rather than on an aspiration for national identity, this reciprocity in local space is central. Thus, the performance and exchange of personal stories provides an opportunity to embrace the sociability of the tour and the emotional responses that it can foster. This emotional reflexivity ‘must extend from an examination of our beliefs’ to the point at which ‘people know themselves to the extent that they are able to respond fully to the emotional needs of others’ (Farrar 2013: 13). Within the social context of the heritage sites, ‘[i]f recognition is not extended to someone, they are, in effect, “not seen – as a full human being whose presence matter[ed in the past, present and future]”’ (Sennett, cited in Lister 2008: 169).

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