

Re-Visiting the Contact Zone:

Museums, Theory, Practice

Abstract

Contact Zones, Third Spaces, and the act of interpretation

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The conceptual understanding of museums as ‘contact zones’ has been widely appropriated in the museum literature and beyond. But the discussion lacks empirical insights: What does ‘contact’ *mean*? How is it *lived, negotiated and contested*? Drawing on a long-term narrative study of global visitors to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), this paper addresses these crucial questions by offering an empirical interrogation and theoretical refinement of the ‘contact zone’. It moves beyond the conceptual vision’s initial focus on museological production by shedding light on the meanings made by visitors.

Clifford’s ‘contact zone’ (1997) concludes with the problem of ‘translation’. Bhabha (1994) in return theorises this ‘translation’ as ‘moments’ or ‘processes’ in the ‘articulation of cultural differences’, and provides a distinctive and particularly useful perspective on ‘cultural action’ (Clifford, 1997) in ‘contact zones’. Bhabha paves the way from the physical place of encounter to the discursive space of dialogue and lays the theoretical foundation for the empirical exploration of ‘cultural action’ as ‘interpretive contests’ (Said, 2003) and their

‘articulation’. By employing narrative hermeneutics as a theoretical and methodological tool, I humanise Te Papa as a ‘contact zone’ through ethnographic research on global visitors and their interpretive actions, movements and performances.

Visitors’ cross-cultural journeys depart from the ‘reader’s world’ (Bauman, 1978). At this stage, the cultural Other is experienced through their own socio-cultural lens, the interpretive community of the Self. The hermeneutic ‘zooming’ (Pamphilon, 1999) in on the different dimensions of the narratives illuminates the multiple layers of meaning. I expose the partly ‘doxic’ (Bourdieu, 1984) nature of discursive spheres and their effects on interpretive processes. The research material indicates the several routes such as self-representation, the reframing of understandings and tour intervention, which open the gates of the ‘reader’s world’ and pave the way to cross-cultural dialogue. At this point, a dialogical ‘Third Space’ (Bhabha, 1994) is created enabling the translation of differences. The empirical evidence shows that the humanisation of culture, people and history renders possible the moral and political engagement with the Other and lays the foundation for a pluralist space. I conclude by arguing that ‘contact zones’ should be understood as *pluralist cosmopolitan spaces*, which facilitate the negotiation of differences within a shared symbolic context. Cross-cultural dialogue within a pluralist cosmopolitan space leads to a cross-cultural hermeneutics, the interpretive ontological endeavour of the *shifting Self*.