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Finding common ground: Engendering a sense of belonging in museum exhibition spaces

DOUBLE-BLIND PEER REVIEWED

In 2016 Museums Victoria undertook consultation to inform the development of an exhibition for the Immigration Museum about post-World War II British migration. During one focus group a participant observed that an exhibition on this topic would simply be '*telling white stories in a brown space*'.¹ The complexity of this statement, and its implications for supporting experiences of belonging for visitors, has always remained with me and acted as a touchstone for subsequent exhibitions. It captures the potential of, and the challenges for, a museum such as the Immigration Museum. It speaks to community ownership of the space — a deep feeling of belonging, yet not necessarily a collective one. It starkly poses the question: what do we mean by an 'inclusive museum'? It queries who the audience of an immigration museum is, and if this museum can push the boundaries of identity definitions and formation which are, to some extent, being constrained by its very name. These are the provocations and the subsequent lessons learnt from specific experiences of serving our publics which this article aims to explore.

The Immigration Museum in Melbourne is embracing more expansive understandings of our diversity, shared histories and ways of belonging. The museum is increasingly, as Elena Gonzales terms it, a '*first voice museum*'² of shared-authority voices which can speak to everyone, not just members of people's particular groups. Inclusivity is central to our practice, but we are still in the process of determining what that inclusivity means, as the following discussion will reveal. Respecting community authority is also a central tenet of the Immigration Museum, and at this point I wish to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which I work and where the Immigration Museum is situated, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boonwurrung Bunurong peoples of the eastern Kulin Nations, and acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded.

¹ Participant, Museums Victoria focus group for *British Migrant: Instant Australians?* exhibition development, held at Melbourne Museum, Carlton, 2016.

² Gonzales, E. (2020). *Exhibitions for Social Justice*. Routledge, p. 142.

These acknowledgements are particularly pertinent in the context of any aspiration to create an environment of belonging at a site as historically and culturally loaded as the Immigration Museum. One definition of belonging is 'possession'³, and the Immigration Museum's existential challenge is that not only is it situated on a site of dispossession (as indeed many of our museums and galleries are) but that the building in which the Immigration Museum is housed — a nineteenth century neo-classical customs house — is a material symbol of colonisation: of taking possession and of making a possession of Country. It was, and continues to be, an act of belonging for some, and an attempt to inflict unbelonging on First Peoples. Acknowledgment does not stop at recognition of traditional and ongoing custodianship and culture, but also includes recognition of land theft, violence, cultural loss and environmental disaster.

Another definition of belonging is '*a feeling of being happy or comfortable as part of a particular group ... because they welcome you and accept you.*'⁴ This is one state of belonging that we as practitioners working in cultural spaces all strive to achieve for our visitors, communities and collaborators. But this notion of 'belonging' can become a truism, meaningless if not regularly revisited in the context of our own spaces, collections and engagement practices. We can equate belonging in a museum context with welcome, trust, inclusion and safety; with providing audiences and collaborators with moments of acknowledgement and opportunities for self-recognition; and with projects resulting in genuine reciprocity. These are all laudable objectives, but constant self-reflection is needed to ensure our methodologies, collecting and exhibition activities are actually achieving those outcomes. It is also relevant to consider whether these belonging places can also have space for the uncomfortable, which can be about really seeing some people's 'unbelonging' and which then instigate challenges to other people's own assumptions about, or comfort in, their own belonging.

This article settles on Sukhmani Khorana's definition of belonging to frame the discussion: '*a situational and embodied feeling not easy to articulate*'⁵, and one that entwines belonging, embodiment and affect to fluidly develop and change as visitors move through our museum spaces or engage with us as collaborators. To explore this further I will share four exhibition experiences from the Immigration Museum, where this form of belonging and the objectives outlined above have been, or are being, achieved. Some have yet unrealised potential, while others realised the very opposite of our aspirations. I have selected exhibitions in which I have been intimately involved as a collaborating curator and which collectively provide a breadth of insights into the complexity of the belonging project — a shape-shifting endeavour that demands agility, sensitivity, and deep listening and learning skills. These exhibitions have also provided a platform for testing and applying the rich museological discourse around belonging, empathy, identity and relevance to our curatorial practice at the Immigration Museum. Here, I candidly share what we have learnt, and continue to learn, from our endeavours to create individual and collective belonging visitor experiences, and to contribute to these conversations through real experiences.

3 Macquarie. (2017). Belonging. In *Macquarie dictionary*. Pan Macmillan Australia (7th ed., vol. A–K, p. 133).

4 Cambridge (n.d.). Belonging. In *Cambridge English dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/belonging>, accessed 8 January 2025.

5 Khorana, S. (2023). *Mediated emotions of migration: Reclaiming affect for agency*. Bristol University Press, p. 96.

Background

Located in Melbourne's 1870s former customs house, this significant neo-classical heritage building was developed into an immigration museum by Museums Victoria via State Government funding, becoming one of a suite of three state museums along with Melbourne Museum and Scienceworks. The Immigration Museum opened to the public in 1998. It was the second museum in Australia (following the Migration Museum in Adelaide, which had opened 10 years prior) to focus solely on the theme of migration. Exhibitions have been supported over the years by an ever-growing heritage collection representing themes and stories of Victorian and Australian migration. This collection now numbers over 10,000 objects, documents, images, oral histories and other audiovisual material.

Over the years the Immigration Museum has evolved from exhibiting predominantly migration-related narratives (and mainly permanent and linear narratives at that) to embracing broader themes through long-term and temporary exhibitions of identity, belonging, temporary migration and mobility, prejudice and racism, citizenship and social diversity in all its forms (beyond the parameters of ethnicity). There is also a much stronger representation of the experiences, voices and identities of First Peoples. Critically, what has also evolved are the collaborative methodologies of how exhibitions are developed.

Clearly these are all complex areas, and the stage is set for the challenges found in the dichotomy between notions of belonging and not belonging. Impacting all the museum's activities, aspirations and future directions are the practicalities of shrinking budgets and shifting audience expectations, alongside expectations of culturally-specific migrant communities.

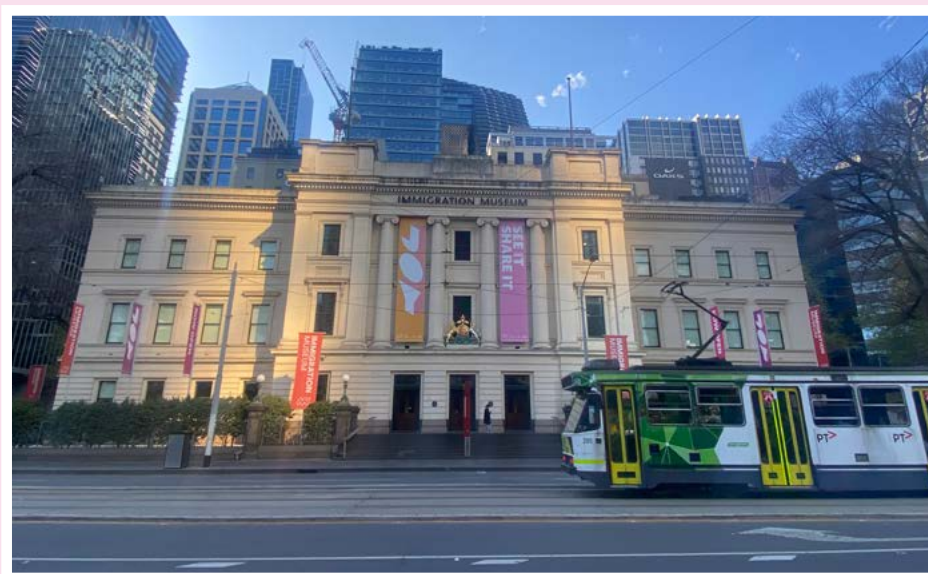


Figure 1: Immigration Museum at Old Customs House, Flinders Street, Melbourne, 2024. Museums Victoria; photographer: Moya McFadzean. © Museums Victoria.

Belonging, empathy and relevance: some discourse perspectives

If museums are building, or are striving to build, spaces of belonging for visitors, communities and co-creators, then they are also aiming to invoke empathetic visitor responses through notions of identity that are multiple, fluid, deeply personal and broadly collective. In doing so, museums have the ability to provoke, support and champion a more open, inclusive, socially-engaged society. The following section of this article considers a selection of writings in museological discourse which examine such entwined terms as belonging, identity, empathy and relevance. They will provide a methodological context for the exhibition analysis to follow, and the means to test how the Immigration Museum has either effectively applied these approaches (through exhibitions, collections and curatorial practices) or fallen short in the endeavour.

As mentioned in the introduction, I drew upon Khorana's recent *Mediated Emotions of Migration* to provide a nuanced definition of belonging and what it can be, which has great resonance for the Immigration Museum and many other museums. Khorana draws on the work of Bissell and co-authors, observing that

*... belonging is both a feeling and a set of practices ... a situational and embodied feeling not easy to articulate ... a feeling that is not pre-determined but one that comes into being through affective encounters, and acting in responsive ways.*⁶

Here is the entwining of belonging, embodiment and affect that is essential to a genuine belonging experience — a belonging experience that can evolve and shift as people move through our museum spaces or as people engage with our museums as collaborators. People can enter with preconceptions about their singular or multiple forms of belonging (family, friends, communities) but these can be reinforced, challenged and broadened through their affective interactions with authentic, diverse storytellers. And these storytellers can also be supported to share their experiences of belonging, and indeed *unbelonging*, in order to enable these interactions.

Khorana is interested in more complex understandings of belonging than are often applied, involving reciprocity and an active participation in the belonging process. This is articulated as a call to move belonging past 'a superficial libertarian focus on harmony ... to what belonging looks and feels like when the focus is on co-creating cultural safety through approaches that favour reciprocity and creativity.'⁷ For the Immigration Museum, this is a provocation to move beyond the creation of *safe spaces* where people can belong — whatever that might look like — towards *activities* where people can find their own connections and articulations of belonging as visitors and as content creators. Belonging can't just be a warm blanket thrown over our museums as a one-size-fits-all approach, but should instigate many moments of active, embodied belonging within our spaces.

Where belonging is mentioned, empathy is not far behind. I see empathy as belonging's partner, and as a methodology to which we are committed at the

6 Bissell, D., Bruce, M., Keane, H., & Tsalapatanis, A. (2019). Introduction: belonging unbound. In D. Bissell, M. Bruce, H. Keane & A. Tsalapatanis (Eds.), *Social beings, future belongings: Reimagining the social*. Routledge. Paraphrased in Khorana, S. (2023), p. 96.

7 Khorana, S. (2023), p. 13.

Immigration Museum. Empathy can support inclusivity, and even solidarity, amongst our visitors and contributors — as will be demonstrated through the following exhibition examples. Gonzales provides a useful launching pad for considering the nature of empathy and its inextricable connection to belonging: '*... empathy arises between individuals. Solidarity arises between groups. Over time, that solidarity can develop into a bond of community.*'⁸ The idea that empathy is a starting point, and not an end in itself, is crucial, offering a path towards community and belonging.

Building on this idea, Elif Gokcigdem suggests that empathy implies a duality, 'a need for "the other"', so that we must create empathetic experiences in order to lead to 'common ground'.⁹ Otherwise the empathy can stay in the moment of privilege. Gokcigdem is interested in

*intentionally designing empathy to create a more compassionate world through an awareness of our essential one-ness ... [Museums] are educational platforms for informal, multigenerational, experiential learning through proximity to a wide spectrum of authentic content and meaningful context ...*¹⁰

This point is key: to achieve those embodied experiences of recognition, reflection and emotional connection, our empathetic engagements need to help move people towards a collective understanding and a desire to aspire to a conscious universality, not harmony. The risk with this aspiration is a pressure to be everything to everyone and to risk nothing; it also assumes that this is what our visitors and collaborators want, when the path to a more complex notion of belonging can embrace differences in values, beliefs and identities. As observed by Steve Lions and Kai Bosworth: '*... when limited to the aims of broadening audiences and producing participatory points of entry for all people, the idea of relevance can become problematic and disempowering for institutions ...*'¹¹

Consequently, the challenge for museums in this space of belonging, empathy and relevance is to bring people along, and to be brought along by people, and through these interactions and exchanges of ideas and experiences have the courage to become part of social advocacy and even resistance. The exhibitions I will now highlight provide the opportunity to reflect on how exhibition development and maintenance practices can support community experiences of belonging. The issues in particular I will examine, and to which I will apply the discourse, are: representation and authority through ongoing collaboration; external creative interventions to challenge histories and experiences of belonging and unbelonging; the importance of exhibition review, renewal and community engagement in maintaining a belonging charter for long-term exhibitions; and the value of applying universal human themes to visitor experiences, in order to engender collective engagement and empathetic belonging.

8 Gonzales, E. (2020), p. 12.

9 Gokcigdem, E. M. (2019). Preface. In E. M. Gokcigdem (Ed.), *Designing for empathy: Perspectives on the museum experience* (p. xvi). Rowman & Littlefield.

10 Gokcigdem, E. M. (2019), p. xvii.

11 Lions, S., & Bosworth, K. (2019). Museums in the climate emergency. In R. R. Janes & R. Sandell (Eds.), *Museum activism* (pp. 176–7). Routledge.

Belonging through ongoing community collaboration and authority: *Attache Case* as a collective refugee artwork

Representation through genuine collaboration can result in experiences of individual and collective belonging, as well as activism through empathy. In using that complex term 'representation', and the oft spoken phrase 'giving voice to the silent and absent voices', I acknowledge that we need to take care that our well-meaning endeavours are not implying a gift from the museum to communities, but rather a shared cultural heritage production with real outcomes beyond the mere presence of those voices. I refer to Bernadette Lynch, who suggests that: *'too often the museum's well-meaning agenda in working with migrants has the effect of subtly relegating migrants to the role of passive beneficiaries, even when ostensibly offering opportunities for collaboration and co-production.'*¹² In this case study I will suggest that belonging and empathy through representation is in the process of being realised: for the storytellers, by the amplification of their own voices and experiences via a central counter-narrative; and for the general public, through the ongoing building of layers of meaning via education and programming.

Attache Case is a collection development and exhibition project that began as a collaboration with Melbourne-based curator and artist Peter Burke in 2015 for an international touring art installation. The artwork is comprised of a repurposed doctor's medical case, which opens to reveal small drawers containing 41 miniature artworks representing 21 artists of diverse refugee backgrounds including Afghanistan, Vietnam, Poland, Hungary, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Iran, Egypt and Iraq. I wish to acknowledge the generosity of Peter and all the artists for enabling the museum to present and represent their artworks and stories in perpetuity.

Subsequently, we worked with Peter over a two-year period to acquire the artwork for the museum's collection. This included gathering the consent of the contributing artists, with the museum providing a modest monetary acknowledgement for this exchange to all the participating contributors. In collaboration with the museum's honorary associate Dr Anh Nguyen, we also documented the artistic intent and biographies of most of the artists. Many artists also provided a photographic portrait for the collection, which provides human faces to the artworks and stories. Through a range of artistic styles, all contained in a predetermined size and form, the artists convey their thoughts and feelings. These artworks expose the trauma, isolation and hopelessness, as well as the hope, resilience and creativity, of those who have endured the uncertainty of seeking asylum. Quoting Jennifer Bailey, Lennon Flowers and Emily May, this is empathy as *'the act of deeply and sincerely attempting to understand what another person is experiencing from within one's own frame of reference through the act of storytelling.'*¹³

¹² Lynch, B. (2017). Migrants, museums, and tackling the legacies of prejudice. In C. Johansson & P. Bevelander (Eds.), *Museums at a time of migration* (pp. 236–7). Nordic Academic Press.

¹³ Bailey, J., Flowers, L., & May, E. (2019). Breaking bread and building bridges: Repairing ruptures in our communities. In Gokcigdem, E.M. (2019), p. 291.

Attache Case was born out of creating a sense of belonging, collective identity, and an artistic outlet for these voices. The power of creativity in this process is well articulated by Shannon Damery and Elsa Mescoli:

*The arts are one of the most accessible conduits through which migrants may find a sense of community belonging, even when not granted any kind of official acceptance or citizenship. It can be a way to increase 'visibility', raise awareness about a certain situation, further political aims, or to allow one to seamlessly fit into community and find group belonging ...*¹⁴

One of the *Attache Case* artists, Alyana Eau, powerfully reflects this point:

*Through art, I can convey what words cannot portray and I express myself without boundaries or limitations. Art to me is more influential and powerful than any language, it is freedom of thought, and it is what my emotions speak.*¹⁵

The acquisition, documentation and display of the work continues that process of acknowledgement, visibility and public legitimacy. By layering *Attache Case* with portraits and documented voices, this collective artwork becomes even more active. Nevertheless, with representation comes ongoing challenges of what representation actually means for the long-term. Most artists are comfortable for their work, created in 2015, to represent them in a moment in time; however, some find they have re-invented and re-defined themselves, which creates a tension between who they are now and what the artwork was created to symbolise.

Some artists want ongoing engagement with their artwork and the museum, but this requires the museum to listen to and to embrace how they now identify themselves. Projects like this can lock people into a moment in time, into one particular identity, and this has been a challenge for at least one of the artists, Egyptian-born Tadros Hanna, who had to flee his home and is now an Australian citizen. He observed that

*I want my journey as an artist to be as [one] from pain to hope. What I want to leave is legacy about humanity. Everyone is looking for a safe place to live and to belong to a place ...*¹⁶

Tadros's artworks, both for *Attache Case* and his subsequent work, are focused on presenting his own desire for belonging and his own agency in presenting his identity through his artistic practice.

So the question becomes: what is someone's ongoing agency in their identity maintenance, particularly when this relates to a static object? The collecting and

14 Damery, S., & Mescoli, E. (2019). Harnessing visibility and invisibility through arts practices: Ethnographic case studies with migrant performers in Belgium. In M. Martinello (Ed.), *Arts and refugees: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (p. 46). MDPI.

15 Eau, A. (2021). Quoted in *Attache case* [Installation]. Immigration Museum, Melbourne & Museums Victoria Collections website, <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/2562818>, accessed 8 January 2025.

16 Hanna, T. (2024). Quoted in *Refugees, art, and activism in a briefcase: The story of attache case* [Video]. Museums Victoria, <https://museumsvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/online-resources-and-tools/collection-video-resources/>, accessed 8 January 2025.



Figure 2: *Attache Case*, 2021. Museums Victoria; photographer: Benjamin Healley; coordinating artist: Peter Burke. © Museums Victoria.



Figure 3: *Attache Case* installation, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2024. Museums Victoria; photographer: Moya McFadzean. © Museums Victoria.

displaying of fluid contemporary narratives can be challenging, and our experience with Tadros demonstrates the importance of ongoing conversations about identity between the curator and artist — and also with the public. A powerful panel session hosted at the Immigration Museum in 2023 with Peter Burke and two of the artists, Zohreh Izadikia and Mehdi Jaghuri,¹⁷ created an opportunity for them to reflect on their refugee experiences, artistic practices, and their lives and identities now. Thus, genuine community engagement must be open to relationships of reciprocity that never end, so that we are creating space for the fluidity of authentic, authoritative voices.

The strength of *Attache Case* as a collective of stories can also be its weakness — the artwork demonstrates a breadth of people and cultural backgrounds, but it still keeps people part of a mass. They are defined first by being 'refugees' rather than as individuals with their own personal stories, perspectives and experiences. For some this was a moment in time and they have moved on. For others it remains fresh, sharp and painful. *Attache Case* artist Gyorgyi Marek reflects:

*I suffered anxiety all my life ... I became interested in art therapy, energy healing and meditation ... My work helps me to stop, pay attention to my life and the world around me. I found my place where I belong.*¹⁸

The challenge for the museum will be to take care to always acknowledge that these miniature artworks were created in a particular place, at a particular time, under particular circumstances, in a particular emotional state, for a particular project. The artworks are static, but the people who created them are not.

The artworks and portraits, on extended display at the Immigration Museum since early 2024 in the *Voices Across Time* gallery, have enabled us to represent a diverse range of people and experiences, and to develop ongoing relationships that are providing platforms for the artists to be heard and seen. Immigration Museum educators are highlighting artworks in their onsite school programs. This has recently included working with one of the artists, Alyana Eau, to develop a first-person reflection on her traumatic refugee journey and the embedded meanings behind her artwork for secondary school history students. This will also provide another layer for the online documentation of the collection. Further, in collaboration with Peter and three of the artists, we also produced a digital story for display and online, supporting three of the artists to share not so much their refugee journey but to reflect on, and make sense of, their disrupted lives. This gives them agency regarding the questions asked and the framing of their own narratives beyond the common presentation of refugee trauma stories. This is the reciprocity and the authority that we want to embed in this living project, and within ongoing relationships — supporting opportunities for changing identities and new interpretations of narratives by the storytellers.

¹⁷ Burke, P., Izadikia, Z., Jaghuri, M., McFadzean, M., & Nguyen, A. (17 June 2023). *Refugees, art, activism* [Museums Victoria public lecture]. Immigration Museum, Melbourne, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XWH_dfyD7c, accessed 8 January 2025.

¹⁸ Marek, G. (2021). Quoted in *Attache case* [Installation]. Immigration Museum, Melbourne & Museums Victoria Collections website, <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/2562831>, accessed 8 January 2025.

Challenging notions of belonging through creative interventions: *Re-Orient* by Pia Johnson

Creative forms of museum interventions can challenge what might be referred to as structural belonging, and assumptions about who could or should (and did or did not) belong in Australia. Through these collaborations, artists can offer a way for museums to examine their own spaces, challenge visitors to test their own assumptions about belonging/unbelonging and see the world through a different lens.

The Immigration Museum was fortunate to collaborate with acclaimed photographer, visual artist, curator and lecturer Dr Pia Johnson (with funding support from Creative Victoria) during 2023 and 2024. Pia initiated this collaboration and approached us with her project, and we were able to secure further resources to support Pia to realise her concept and install her self-portraits at the Immigration Museum. Pia's artist statement defines her photography and installation as:

*a site-specific performative self-portrait series that uses the Customs House to explore post-colonial identity and migration. As a female Eurasian Australian artist, I 're-orient' myself through the physical spaces of the museum, its collection and architecture. The photographs investigate how we understand our transnational communities and stories, negotiate our collective histories and question how place can shift our sense of belonging across time.*¹⁹

The result was *Re-Orient: Reclaiming Spaces, Redefining Stories* (Immigration Museum, March–August 2024), which engaged with concepts of belonging and identity within a colonising construct.²⁰ Through this creative partnership, Pia challenged the museum's spaces and drew on our heritage collections in unexpected ways to further layer this act of intervention. Customs House, in which the Immigration Museum is housed, was constructed over 150 years ago on unceded Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung lands. It remains an act of dispossession, and a statement of colonising power and economic control — a symbol of the people who conducted business there, and the people who were dispossessed, processed, accepted and rejected there. As mentioned previously, the very fabric and history of the building creates an existential crisis for the museum in balancing its past and its ongoing symbolism with the narratives and voices we want to highlight today. The belonging/unbelonging tensions impacting First Peoples and non-white migrants, through acts of dispossession and racist exclusionary policies, are present in the building's walls and foundations. Through co-designed exhibitions and experiences, the Immigration Museum is working to confront these tensions head-on.

For over 25 years these spaces have housed joyful, sorrowful and resilient stories of First Peoples, migrants and their descendants. Through *Re-Orient*, Pia used Customs House as a set on which to assert herself, and her cultural and gendered identities. Her self-portraits interrogated the building's multiple layers of meaning relating to colonisation, empire and White Australia. In some of the portraits, Pia incorporated (with donor consent) migrant family photographs and documents from the museum's

19 Johnson, P. (2024). Artist Statement in *Re-orient: Reclaiming spaces, redefining stories* [Exhibition text]. Immigration Museum, Melbourne.

20 Johnson, P. (n.d.). <https://www.piajohnson.com/reorient/wwwp42h4npxtcamizikkmw9eowrd6zd>, accessed 8 January 2025.



Figure 4: Pia Johnson standing in *Re-Orient* installation, Community Gallery, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2024. Source and photographer: Phoebe Powell; artist: Pia Johnson. © Pia Johnson.

Figure 5: Entrance to *Re-Orient* installation, Community Gallery, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2024. Source and photographer: Phoebe Powell; artist: Pia Johnson. © Pia Johnson.



collection, inviting the viewer to see the people in the photos — and, consequently, Customs House itself — differently. There is resonance here in Viv Golding's observation of the importance of museums in '*working with insider and outsider readings or interpretations, prompting diverse multi-sensory ways of knowing and seeing, and facilitating empathetic understandings in audiences.*'²¹ Pia's photographs had her, and the people represented in the historical photos she incorporated, beginning as outsiders but ending as insiders, pushing back and out, and inviting the viewer to empathetically engage from their own location in the narrative.

Consequently, through *Re-Orient*, Pia gifted the Immigration Museum an invaluable opportunity to confront the legacies of a building steeped in its history of colonisation and White Australia — a museum in a building built on exclusion. These kinds of visitor experiences can only be achieved when the museum embraces challenging conversations, opens itself up to examination of its architecture and cedes the space for diverse storytellers and perspectives. Pia offered a provocation, a performative intervention, captured and displayed on the walls of the very architecture being poked and prodded. To continue the legacy-building, we have now acquired from Pia a selection of her work to bring these provocations into our permanent collection.²²

Renewal and engagement practices: unbelonging in the *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* exhibition

For all a museum's best intentions, visitor experiences of belonging can be endangered when long-term exhibitions are not interrogated and reviewed, and when they fall behind evolving social and political discourses, engagement methodologies and cultural safety protocols.

Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours opened at the Immigration Museum in 2011. In some ways this was an exhibition ahead of its time, taking the concept of *belonging* as being in a binary relationship with *not belonging* and considering how this intersection impacts our understandings and experiences of individual and collective identity formation in contemporary Australian society. Diverse stories, many presented through video form and material culture, demonstrate how we find collective forms of belonging through forms of association; discover and present identities through creative practices; make assumptions about one another through first impressions; and show how prejudice leads to alienation — making being ourselves difficult, painful or even impossible.

The introductory experience is a corridor projection entitled *Welcome* by renowned Australian multimedia artist Lynette Wallworth. It sets up the exhibition's belonging/not belonging binary by having life-sized people of diverse culture, age, faith, gender and abilities alternately welcoming, rejecting and shaking visitors out of their unconscious biases and their assumptions about their own tribes. In reflecting on the piece, Wallworth states: '*We have the means via the smallest gesture to include*

21 Golding, V. (2009). *Learning at the museum frontiers: Identity, race and power*. Ashgate Publishing, p. 43.

22 Museums Victoria. (2024). *Pia Johnson on reclaiming spaces and redefining stories with Re-orient* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLNb1Ho8Y1k>, accessed 8 January 2025.



Figure 6: *First Impressions* gallery in the Identity exhibition, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Moya McFadzean. © Museums Victoria.



Figure 7: *Welcome* installation in the *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* exhibition, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2021. Museums Victoria; photographer: Rodney Start. © Museums Victoria.

or exclude and to signal whether someone is an outsider or not.'²³ All the people featured answered a community call-out for participants to enable us to create this work.

Welcome is a powerful example of affective embodiment; an illustration of what Golding describes as embodied knowledge: '*whereby the strange can become familiar, and the familiar strange*'²⁴ and '*... being open to being affected by that which [we] cannot know or feel.*'²⁵

The work inverts our notions of belonging and disrupts our assumptions about how and with whom we think we belong and don't belong. It sets up visitors for the next gallery, which considers how we make assumptions about people from our first impressions and how we find ways to belong through diverse collective affiliations. These themes are presented through the authentic voices of numerous storytellers of layered social and cultural diversities, which both fulfil and challenge expectations.

The *Identity* exhibition was the first at the Immigration Museum to present a strong social activist, anti-racist platform, and to overtly call out racism in the past and present. It also aimed to create uncomfortable experiences by acknowledging some people's experiences of unbelonging, instigating challenges to people's assumptions or comfortability in their own belonging. The central experience within this theme is an immersive theatre presenting an enacted moment of casual racism on a Melbourne tram, which visitors can rewatch through the eyes of the perpetrator, victim and bystanders. This has been an enormously popular educational tool over the years and can be viewed on the museum website.²⁶ The experience demands discomfort in order to support visitors in understanding belonging more deeply.

The *Identity* exhibition continues to have much to offer in championing our multiple identities and standing against racism — and it needs to, since we have no budget for a major redevelopment of these galleries in the near future. Unfortunately, what became evident is that when long-term exhibitions are not interrogated and reviewed, they fall behind evolving social and political discourses, engagement methodologies and cultural safety protocols. We started to question whether the belonging/not belonging binary into which the exhibition is organised holds up, and we acknowledge that the central tenet of calling out 'othering' in society could actually be 'othering' some visitors. It was time to deconstruct one of the intents of *Identity* — to educate primarily white, privileged audiences — and acknowledge that this approach needs more nuance.

One installation drew pointed and public critique on social media in recent years. This display focused on popular culture and cultural stereotyping, and highlighted racist and gendered toys, games, advertising, consumer packaging and cultural appropriation. The objective was to demonstrate how our racist attitudes and behaviours are learnt and perpetuated through the everyday. However, while aiming to call out the insidiousness of prejudice and stereotyping in popular culture, we were alienating some of the very visitors we were wanting to support.

23 Wallworth, L. (n.d). Museums Victoria. About the exhibition. <https://museums victoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/resources/identity/about-the-exhibition/>, accessed 8 January 2025.

24 Golding, V. (2019). Feminism and the politics of friendship in the activist museum. In R. R. Janes et al. (2019), p. 128.

25 Golding, V. (2019). In R. R. Janes et al. (2019), p. 135.

26 Museums Victoria. (n.d.). *People like them*. <https://museums victoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/resources/identity/people-like-them/>, accessed 13 January 2025.



Figure 8: Tram interactive in the *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* exhibition, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2022. Museums Victoria; photographer: Joel Checkley, Tiny Empire Collective. © Tiny Empire Collective.

Figure 9: *My Culture or Yours?* installation in the *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* exhibition, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2021. Museums Victoria; photographer: Moya McFadzean. © Museums Victoria.



Golding has referred to the possibility of a 'third space' in which museum

... experiences [are] created through interaction between people in a spatial location where they feel safe to explore creatively individual and collective histories ... even if the participants do not share all aspects of histories in common ... It can be a process of ... slowly dismantling the barriers of 'otherness' and recognising concerns that humans share collaboratively ... [This] ... frontier space ... requires the museum to facilitate relations of trust and solidarity.²⁷

And here is the crux of the problem in this section of the *Identity* exhibition: while amplifying the material landscape of othering and racism, we sacrificed trust and lost the opportunity for constructive, supported change. We put the racism of popular culture on display in order to expose how racism can be normalised, but we did that without warning, without contextual nuance and, perhaps most significantly, without the personal, lived perspectives of the subjects of that racism. Our exhibition about belonging and not belonging was, for some, a deeply unsafe space.

Andrea Witcomb has applied her intensive analysis of the use of affect in museums to *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours*. Witcomb points to museum experiences which work by 'provoking unsettlement', by inviting curiosity and by requiring a degree of 'emotional and intellectual labour on the part of the visitor through an in-depth engagement' with an exhibition.²⁸ The space created for visitors to find empathetic connections with real people and apply their own experiences is what has made, as acknowledged by Witcomb, the *Welcome* and tram immersive experiences so effective. However, this space for visitors to connect, engage and reflect was omitted, albeit unintentionally, by the popular culture stereotypes installation — dominated instead by the brutality of the objects, the failure to contextualise them, and the separation of the racist object messaging from the real people both represented and impacted. Unlike the other installations, the display was dehumanising and the empathetic moment was lost.

The language style used on graphics, which had aimed to be deliberately questioning and conversational, clearly did not match the gravity of the objects and now felt trivialising. We were failing to bring everyone with us. We presented the racism, we named it, but we didn't move this endeavour forward through providing lived experience with real impacts. We had not been, as Golding observes, '... sensitive to barriers for participation that prevent inclusive learning in the museum.'²⁹ And this quote from Bailey, Flowers and May could have had this popular culture installation in mind when they observe that: '... to consider from afar what someone else must be feeling risks egocentrism, ignoring the particularities of every individual and the array of experiences and trusts that inform who we are.'³⁰ It is painfully obvious now that instead we presented the narrative at a distance, through the cold, hard artefacts of prejudice, without the human faces and voices to connect with visitors and engender that critical empathy.

²⁷ Golding, V. (2009), pp. 56–7.

²⁸ Witcomb, A. (2013). Understanding the role of affect in producing a critical pedagogy for history museums. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 28(3), pp. 255–71.

²⁹ Golding, V. (2009), p. 48.

³⁰ Bailey, J. et al. (2019). In Gokcigdem, E. M. (2019), p. 296.

We offered no agency and we created an unsafe space that could be traumatising and re-traumatising. These outcomes were the antithesis of what we wanted to achieve, but for some visitors it was the outcome. And for all visitors, it is now clear, it was a missed opportunity for positive activism.

So the question became, as posed by Melanie Adams and Kayleigh Bryant-Greenwell: *'How can the museum create experiences that dismantle racism instead of putting it on display?'*³¹ Instead of displaying the stereotypes, we needed to cede the space to actual people to discuss and counter those stereotypes, and provide a supportive environment in which to achieve this. The rest of the *Identity* exhibition is layered with diverse voices, all speaking to challenging issues, but in that final gallery, by stopping at the next critical step and in focusing on difference, we fell short of our goals.

The popular culture installation has now been deinstalled and replaced with video stories and graphics from a previous exhibition, including collaborators Tasneem Chopra (Melbourne-based cross-cultural consultant) and Richard Chadwick (also known as drag queen Karen from Finance) reflecting on their experiences growing up of belonging, bullying and internalised prejudice. Tasneem observes:

*I remember the specific incident of bullying at the age of seven where my difference became apparent to me ... What this experience taught me is that, number one, I owe nobody an explanation of who I am, nor do I have to ever question my right to belong.*³²

This is clearly a more authentic way to engage visitors with these issues (whether through relatable or empathetic responses). Here is the road to collective belonging and true empathy, empowering visitors through great understanding and self-recognition — which was always the desired outcome. It is not about removing confronting histories from our exhibitions, which risks perpetuating absences and silences. We can engage without alienating, and challenge without losing that gesture of welcome to our visitors.

The *Identity* exhibition will continue its essential evolution. We can find guidance in Maria Vlachou's observation that

*museums can create spaces with the possibility of meeting 'the other', seeing beyond labels and stereotypes. These encounters with real people can open up dialogue, tolerance and respect; they can create possibilities for realising that there are things that unite us as well as differences between us.*³³

We have been able to find further opportunities for content renewal through important creative partnership programs such as the museum's Culture Makers initiative. *Threads*, a beautiful stop-motion animation video piece exploring Melbourne artists Kate Robinson and Maria Birch-Morunga's journeys to reclaim lost Iranian and Māori

31 Adams, M., & Bryant-Greenwell, K. (2022). No longer business as usual: Reconstructing relevancy through critical race theory. In J. L. Porter & M. P. Cunningham (Eds.), *Museum education for today's audience* (pp. 229–44). Rowman & Littlefield.

32 Chopra, T. (2024–5). *Identity: Yours, mine, ours* [Exhibition text]. Immigration Museum, Melbourne.

33 Vlachou, M. (2019). Dividing issues and mission-driven activism: Museum responses to migration policies and the refugee crisis. In R. R. Janes et al. (2019), p. 54.



Figure 10: *Being Ourselves* installation featuring Tasneem Chopra in the *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* exhibition, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2021. Museums Victoria; photographer: Moya McFadzean. © Museums Victoria.

cultural heritage, has a temporary home in 2024–25 as the exhibition's concluding experience. We are also continuing our active partnerships with storytellers from recent exhibitions, such as Melbourne creative Adolfo Aranjuez, in order to repurpose powerful content. Adolfo's reflection now concludes the *Identity* exhibition: 'What mattered was my resolve to navigate the world the way I wanted to, comfortable in my own skin.'³⁴ These are small but important steps to bring fresh perspectives and relevance to a long-term exhibition.

Belonging and empathy through a shared-humanity approach: *Love* and *Becoming You* exhibitions

The broadening of the Immigration Museum's charter to embrace universal themes of shared humanity and diversity in all its forms has provided new opportunities for collective engagement and empathetic belonging. Universal-humanity themed exhibitions like *Love* (2018–19) and *Becoming You* (2021–23) assist this process through a first-person approach that brings storytellers and visitors together in unexpected ways. These points of connection and memory increase empathy by focusing on similarities between oneself and others, as Sara Konrath observes here:

*We don't need to experience exactly the same situations as others to understand similar emotions as them. Everyone feels grief, anxiety, love, and awe ... The practice of focusing on a 'common humanity' can be especially powerful ...*³⁵

This is the very definition of these two exhibitions at the Immigration Museum, which are universally relatable and created experiences of deep empathy and collective belonging for visitors and collaborators alike.

The *Love* exhibition was a moving and powerful exploration of this most fundamental human experience — resulting in one of the Immigration Museum's most popular and memorable shows. Historical and contemporary community voices breathed life and authentic emotion into historical and contemporary objects and artworks from the collections of Museums Victoria and Heide Museum of Modern Art.³⁶ The exhibition encompassed all kinds of love between people — family love, romantic love, love between friends — as well as the range of emotional experiences that love entails, from joy, comfort and intimacy to grief and sorrow. The personal accounts represented people of diverse gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age and locality, as well as people across time, to offer opportunities for deep resonance and connection with visitors.

The process of gathering storytellers to collaborate with the museum was a mixed approach resulting in around 30 stories. In some instances we started with the objects and approached the collection donors to provide the voices. Where objects had been removed from their cultural context, such as a group of beautiful Zulu love

34 Aranjuez, A. (2024–5). *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* [Exhibition text]. Immigration Museum, Melbourne.

35 Konrath, S. (2019). *Empathy, narcissism and visual arts engagement*. In Gokcigdem, E. M. (2019), p. 75.

36 McFadzean, M. (2018). Past Exhibition – *Love*, Immigration Museum, 1 Dec 2018–28 Apr 2019. Museums Victoria Collections, <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/16604>, accessed 13 January 2025.



Figure 11: *Love* exhibition, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2019. Museums Victoria; photographer: Benjamin Healley. © Museums Victoria.

Figure 12: *Rewriting the Rules, Becoming You* exhibition, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2021. Museums Victoria; photographer: Cesur Sanli. © Museums Victoria.



Figure 13: *Putting on a Show, Becoming You* exhibition, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2021. Museums Victoria; photographer: Cesur Sanli. © Museums Victoria.

Figure 14: Visitors interacting with story cards in the *Love* exhibition, Immigration Museum, Melbourne, 2019. Museums Victoria; photographer: Moya McFadzean. © Museums Victoria.

beadworks, we worked with local communities to find an appropriate storyteller in South Africa to reconnect these items to culture and community. We also approached creatives to lend their objects of meaning in order to speak to their love experience. The design solution was warm and welcoming, and the intimacy of the experience was further achieved through the first-person storytelling delivered via a tailored digital guide, directly connecting visitors to storytellers.

Love was an exercise in 'intentional intersectionality', which successfully opened audiences up to not only seeing and hearing their own stories in unexpected ways, but also engendered an environment of collective solidarity, bringing people back to their commonality rather than differences. In reflecting on methodologies of shared authority and empathy that work for social justice, Gonzales suggests that we can

*... explode categories that hinder empathy and solidarity and retain those that band groups and individuals together. This is about using intersectionality intentionally for practical purposes — exposing relationships visitors may not have known they had, helping to build new ones, and helping to dissolve group identities that do not support the work for social justice.'*³⁷

Love worked because the storytellers were authentic, and generously willing to share their emotions and experiences — they were real, and therefore visitor responses were real and powerful.

Similarly, the next exhibition in this universal shared humanity series, *Becoming You: An Incomplete Guide*, presented 71 coming-of-age stories through this intersectional approach. Stories for this project were gathered through an online community call-out, and fell into natural groupings around pushing boundaries, dreams, milestones, activism, sex and bodies, performance and self-expression, and belonging. They were presented in textual, audio and video form, some with objects. As a collective, they offered an emotional register that was as diverse as the stories and people who shared them. Environments for each theme were intimate and immersive, and we worked with local creatives as well as our own designers to develop soundscapes and aesthetics.

Whether an impression of a library to represent rules or a warm, tactile space to embrace often challenging body-related stories, physical immersion was key to amplifying the power of the authentic voices. A theatre space presented five storytellers on a one-to-one human scale — so visitors felt they were being directly addressed by the storytellers. Stories included first love, first pay packet, first time as a pallbearer; rebelling against climate change inaction and bullying; becoming a woman, a dancer, a drag queen, an astronomer, a muso, a cool wheelchair user; rediscovering culture.

The final presentation of the stories was the result of constant collaboration. Some stories were deeply private, and we were extremely aware that the storytellers were entrusting the museum with their stories: to take care of them, honour them and create environments to encourage visitors to do the same. The empathetic value of first-person voices and methodologies offers space for conversations, while still

³⁷ Gonzales, E. (2020), p. 163.

negotiating such issues as racism. The power of this approach was witnessed (as it was in the *Love* exhibition) by the engagement of visitors through a simple 'leave your love' or 'coming-of-age story' on cards displayed in the space. These cards acted as an ongoing layering of the exhibitions, validating community stories and demonstrating the impact of affect. Indeed, in *Becoming You*, the catharsis and safety revealed by some visitor cards resulted in the need for careful moderation by floor staff to achieve a balance between inclusivity and the potential for re-traumatising other visitors, and we retrospectively installed a label explaining this process transparently to our audiences.

Here we have the creation of a genuinely shared space for visitors and storytellers alike, offering, states Riccardo Manzotti, '*... an opportunity for a deeper experience by allowing people to share a common existential space in which they can transcend their individuality...*'³⁸ This shared space enables empathy to lead '*to the emergence of a shared space in which people feel what others feel and, crucially, to what other visitors are.*'³⁹ This feels like the very essence of belonging.

Conclusion

The exhibitions shared in this article have aimed to offer some useful ideas and lessons from our experiences at the Immigration Museum. In terms of my curatorial practice, these projects have been enormously formative. From the *Attache Case* acquisition and installation project, I have been reminded that personal identity evolves, that our collaborators must be supported to retain control over their own narratives, and that collecting practices — in the laudable act of preservation — can freeze living people in a moment in time. From Dr Pia Johnson and the *Re-Orient* project, there was the joy of genuine collaboration, and garnering the benefits of relinquishing authority and supporting the application of a creative lens on a site crying out to be pulled apart. From the *Identity* exhibition I learnt the hard way the dangers of not having a shared-authority interpretative approach, or indeed a nuanced understanding of the nature of belonging — best intentions in exposing racism don't always lead to empowering the very people we want to champion. And from the *Love* and *Becoming You* exhibitions, I found affirmation in the power of platforming authentic voices, exploding the assumed definitions of identity in an immigration museum, and witnessing demonstrations by visitors of a shared humanity in our museum spaces.

Honest self-reflection is (or should be) a never-ending process which, to be meaningful and instil change, requires constant collaboration — and the resources with which to make engagement genuine and lasting. We are currently interrogating whether our existing long-term exhibitions still serve our audiences and where investment in new content can come from. Community engagement practices in the cultural sector have evolved, and we need to evolve as well in order to keep building our 'belonging credentials' in our communities. At the Immigration Museum, we have accumulated much experience and insight, and there is so much potential to keep

38 Manzotti, R. Empathetic space and shared consciousness: Museums and the application of spread mind theory. In Gokcigdem, E. M. (2019), p. 49.

39 Manzotti, R. In Gokcigdem, E. M. (2019), p. 59.

transforming, decolonising, trialling, failing and succeeding. We have the opportunity to check, as Gretchen Jennings, founder of the Empathetic Museum, has termed it, '*our institutional body language*.'⁴⁰ Is it welcoming, is it conversational, is it representative, is it empathetic — is the Immigration Museum a belonging place? I believe so, but there is much work still to do.

An unpublished version of this article was presented as a keynote address at the Museums & Galleries Queensland Conference, Toowoomba, 9–11 October 2024.

40 Jennings, G. (2015). Maturity model. Quoted in Coleman, L. S., & Moore, P. Grassroots social justice activism in American museums. In R. R. Janes et al. (2019), p. 97.