Reflections of Indigenous History *inside* the National Museums of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand and *outside* of New Caledonia’s Centre Culturel Jean-Marie Tjibaou

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This paper proposes a comparative analysis of discourses of indigenous history as they emerge from three recently established institutions: the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra, Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington, and the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre (CCT) in Noumea. As we shall see, while these institutions were all inaugurated in the span of four years (1998–2001) and while they have all responded to similar imperatives - such as the need to showcase national or territorial identities or to participate in reconciliation processes - they have each adopted different stances, approaches and strategies in their representations of indigenous and/or colonial pasts. These divergences are particularly interesting because they belie the extent to which the historiographies of these three countries have converged in the last thirty years, and because they reflect different approaches to questions of postcolonial identity and history in colonies of settlement.

The principal feature of this convergence - against which the differences highlighted in later sections may be contrasted - is the process of historiographic redescription of colonial history, which has been characterised by, roughly speaking, a three phased evolution. The ‘detection’ of indigenous resistance, typical of the historiographies of the 1970s, was followed by a generalised reappraisal of indigenous agency and collaborative practices in the 1980s. As they have emerged, these new historiographies have been challenged or contested by those who would defend more traditional/conventional narratives - for example, as the descendants of settlers struggle to protect the reputation of their ancestors and the ideologies of colonisation. This friction between renovated historiographies and conservative public discourses has given rise to moments of heated debate and polemic and, particularly in Australia, a polarisation between the so-called ‘black-armband’ and ‘white blindfold’ views of the past.

Also common to these three settler colonies are the processes of national/indigenous reconciliation, which have been on the public agenda for two or more decades. In New Zealand the central feature of this process is the Treaty of Waitangi and the Waitangi Tribunal, which, since 1985, has had jurisdiction over claims/grievances dating from 1840. In New Caledonia the core documents are the 1988 Matignon Accords and the 1998 Noumea Accord, which aim to rebalance the Kanak and colonial economies and to create a shared future or destiny. In Australia it was the 1992 High Court’s ruling on the ‘Mabo’ case which controversially pushed reconciliation to the top of the public agenda. In relation to these institutions, decisions or agreements, historians have been challenged to reconsider the colonial past; to find or imagine new relationships; to create new foundations; or to transcend histories of dispossession, colonisation and conflict.

This paper considers the extent to which these three institutions have engaged with the discipline of history (the respective national or territorial historiographies and their approaches to indigenous history) and reconciliation processes. This is a potentially vast area of study and the following snapshots and reflections may well be contested. The underlying premise of this study is that because each institution is deeply involved in the display of national identities, the historical images they produce or choose to represent allow a privileged point of observation.

Display, representation and reconciliation emerge as processes inextricably intertwined with each other. The specificities of each exhibition/collection in relation to the indigenous presence - and the relationship between indigenous history and the wider, ‘national’, collection - reflect in many ways the different approaches which these three postcolonial states have developed to deal with indigenous autonomy.
a) Te Papa: Speaking with “the authority that arises from scholarship and Matauranga Maori” [10]

It is somewhat ironic, perhaps, that Wellington harbour which witnessed the arrival of the first New Zealand Company settlers, is now home to The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, a museum and art-gallery dedicated to the celebration of the nation’s biculturalism. The irony is that Wellington, the national capital, is a long way from Waitangi, the site most frequently associated with foundational relations between Maori and Pakeha New Zealanders. Whereas William Pember Reeves interpreted the New Zealand Company’s arrival, on the 22nd of January, 1840, as “the true date of the foundation of the colony”, it is the Treaty of Waitangi which dominates the conceptual/historical organisation of Te Papa, the new national museum. [11] According to “Te Papa Concept”, the consultative process which preceded the inauguration of the museum, “matters of concern to Te Papa are expressed within the conceptual framework of: Papatuanuku the earth on which we all live; Tangata Whenua those who belong to the land by the right of first discovery; Tangata Tiriti those who belong to the land by right of the Treaty.” [12]

Surprisingly, there is no explicit reference to the discipline of history either in the various statements of intent or in the functions set out in Section 7 of the Parliamentary Act which governs the museum. [13] Perhaps this indicates that history and the reference to it is taken for granted in the context of Te Papa’s activities; rather than being an indication of historical unawareness, it highlights the extent to which a bicultural narrative of Aotearoa/New Zealand has become institutionalised. According to its mission statement, “[t]he Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa is a forum for the nation to present, explore, and preserve the heritage of its cultures and knowledge of the natural environment in order to better understand and treasure the past, enrich the present and meet the challenges of the future.” [14] The museum’s statement of principles which propose an interesting alternance between neoliberal wisdom and the postmodern vision of Aotearoa/New Zealand’s biculturalism - reflects the process of economic and national redefinition/restructuring that has characterised the country in the last two decades. [15] New Zealand has traditionally responded with outstanding enthusiasm to the successive waves of globalising tendencies, and there is further evidence of this both in the evolution of Te Papa’s exhibitions and in their attempt to put the bicultural ideal into practice.

Te Papa was inaugurated in 1993 with the merging of the National Museum and the National Art Gallery. Nicholas Thomas has noted how the prototype exhibition, “Voices”, was flawed in its attempt to incorporate the new historical bicultural - sensibility:

> The values rather than the form of the national narrative were altered; adjustments that seemed to be required by the idea of bicultural nationhood were made, but a certain kind of history remained intact. That history began in a particular natural setting; it had an indigenous opening chapter that was followed by white discovery, settlement and twentieth century experience […]. [16]

By comparison, the exhibition contained within the new museum, which opened in 1998, is certainly more successful. New Zealand’s official insistence on biculturalism is represented in a way that underlines a binary division between Pakeha and Maori narratives. Maori preferences for a more conventional mode of museum presentation of taonga (Maori treasures) are acknowledged; and - most importantly - a Maori counterpoint to Pakeha history, with a tendency towards refusing chronological sequence, has been incorporated. [17] Moreover, there is a conscious attempt to present the two narratives in tension with each other: the outcome is a high degree of sophistication that at least one commentator has interpreted as ‘uncertainty’. [18]

However, it is in the relationship with indigenous communities - the “bicultural Partnership” - that Te Papa is, perhaps, at its most innovative. The relationship is understood as a continuing one, and the museum reaffirms the indigenous right to self-representation: “Te Papa will continue to create positive ongoing partnerships with iwi and a long-term strategy for the Iwi Exhibition programme will be developed and implemented”. [19] This involves an ongoing series of exhibitions showcasing each iwi. While this is a reflection of the widespread ‘iwization’ of Maori politics and historiography, it is also a reflection of Te Papa’s commitment to acknowledge Maori protocol. [20] Te Papa is represented as an active instrument of intercommunity collaboration, as an institution fully engaged with the representation of a relatively sophisticated version of the country’s history. [21]

The discursive history in action at Te Papa mirrors the state of Aotearoa/New Zealand’s historiography: the ‘founding’ peoples are two - there is no doubt about that - yet their history is irreducibly intertwined. [22] A common narrative has been developed and has progressively become a master narrative that is represented as a
history of an unending partnership.


In terms of their general conceptual framework, the National Museum of Australia and Te Papa have much in common. Both use natural history and the environment as a foundation for narratives of human interaction and nation. Whereas Te Papa is organised around ‘land’, ‘people of the land’ and ‘people of the Treaty’, the NMA’s three themes are “land”, “nation” and “people”. [24] Yet, there are also significant differences: Te Papa is dominated by the Treaty and the idea of two peoples, but the NMA makes no formal reference to how indigenous/setter relations might be conceptualised other than in the temporal terms of priority suggested by “First Australians”. It is also the case that history has a more formal presence in the legislation which describes the functions of the NMA - perhaps history needs to be made explicit because of its contentiousness. [25]

There are two points to be made here: the first is that the “First Australians” exhibition represents a sophisticated attempt to produce an accessible narrative of the complexity of the history of Aboriginal people; the second, more critical, point concerns the position of “First Australians” in relation to the narratives presented in the other sections of the museum. [26]

The “First Australians” gallery is the largest of the four permanent exhibitions. It sets out to incorporate the most recent interpretative developments. [27] As an early media release stresses,

“First Australians represents a new and highly consultative approach to presenting indigenous history and culture,” says Program Director Margo Neale. “Not only does it look forward and embrace contemporary themes, it places great importance on revealing the past […]. While profiling 40,000 years of Indigenous heritage, the gallery also deals frankly with contact history, illuminating the more recent history of frontier conflicts, land rights battles and ongoing attempts to negotiate co-existence. [28]

In fact, a significant part of “First Australians” is devoted to “Negotiating Coexistence” and images of cooperation. For example, the use of John Batman’s deal as ‘proof’ of acknowledgement of indigenous rights to property is indicative of curatorial attention to the possibilities inherent in the display of historical documents for the reconstruction of alternative narratives: “[a]lthough Batman’s group failed, their attempt of purchase shows that important colonists recognised that indigenous people owned land. Thus it questioned the basis of British colonisation in Australia”. [29]

The display entitled “Conflicting Frontiers” is especially worthy of attention in this context and demonstrates the extent to which the recent historiography has been acknowledged and included. [30] The display consists of a secluded, dimly lit environment and a dramatic musical background centred around a map of Australia which is progressively illuminated in a graphic chronological representation of the country’s expanding frontiers. All of the country is clearly subjected to this process and a timeline placed below the map reveals an unbroken line of conflict that stretches between the 1790s and the 1930s. The traditional historical geography of the country is upset: the ‘quiet continent’ and its relatively uneventful timeline are replaced by the description of a countrywide land war. The display includes original material form these conflicts - muskets, uniforms, Aboriginal weapons - and, in a telling indication of curatorial approach, forces the visitor to confront Fiona Foley’s sculpture entitled “The Annihilation of the Blacks”. [31] There is no way to avoid Foley’s interpretation of racial conflict, where a group of black people is represented hanging from a rope stretched between two poles and guarded by a white figure who casts a long shadow in the direction of the viewer.

One wonders, though, why armed conflict is limited to 1788-1928 and why cooperation/coexistence only follows this phase. More importantly, it is the location of this history - in relation to the rest of the country’s historical experience and in relation to the rest of Aboriginal history - that begs a monumental question: why should the conflict on the frontier only relate to Aboriginal history; why is it alienated from ‘mainstream’ history; and why is the onus of coexistence placed on Aboriginal history rather than the nation’s history? Throughout the NMA, ‘Australian’ history is separated from ‘Aboriginal’ history and is constructed as an appendix to it, with the result that their interface is either denied or subsumed within the latter. The engagements of the museum with history, especially Aboriginal history, and its recent hosting of a roundtable conference on frontier warfare, while submitting to an increasing attention towards historical themes, do not alter this balance. [32]
Thus, despite acknowledging Aboriginal presence and history, the Museum keeps the two traditions apart, as if ‘Aboriginality’ had developed and survived in a parallel but non-contact way within Australia. This divide is easily detectable in the leaflet provided for visitors. In the section dedicated to Aboriginal Australia, the accent is laid on the performing arts - “Immerse yourself in Indigenous dance and music as you enter the First Australians Gallery” - while the sections dedicated to non-indigenous Australians strongly emphasise historical progression: “Imagine yourself at Sydney Cove after the arrival of the First Fleet in Horizons”. The exhibitions themselves also convey this disjointing. In “Symbols of Australia”, for instance, there is little reference to Aboriginal contributions (despite the utilisation of over 700 props and objects). Aside from a display of appropriated images or symbols, not a single one of these objects is unmediatedly Aboriginal: the flag, the scaled down Federation Arch, the typical country town statue of the digger are left undisturbed and Aboriginal presences rarely appear.

Why this division? It should be emphasised that the necessity of controlling historical production has been one important feature of conservative strategies in Australia, and that John Howard has based much of his success on the awareness of the necessity of recapturing history for the Liberal camp. While the Aboriginal experience is given an enhanced yet separated space, no ‘black armband history’ is allowed to upset the celebrations of the permanent exhibitions of the upper levels of the Museum. Preoccupied by the ‘apartheid’ that native title may bring to the Australian outback, the historical vision that informs these two exhibitions does not seem to be worried about the rigorous separation of historical narratives for Aborigines and white Australians.

Ultimately, each of the historical narratives that the museum constructs is sophisticated, yet there is no communication or cross-over between them; their selective assembling may denote an ideological attempt to acknowledge Aboriginality without allowing it to intrude into the ‘upper levels’ of historical reference. The fringe dwellers of Australian historiography have been ‘allowed in’ but have remained subordinate to a discursive practice that may substantially deny their intelligent interaction with non-indigenous Australia.

c) The Centre Tjibaou: “A centre for the creation and diffusion of contemporary Kanak culture”

Like Te Papa and the NMA, the Tjibaou Cultural Centre occupies a waterfront site (on the fringes of the ‘white’ city of Noumea) and it is a long way from Balade, the site of first contact, and the main centres of Kanak population in the North of New Caledonia. Unlike Te Papa and the NMA, however, this Cultural Centre is not represented as a museum or as a national institution; it was planned as a Kanak ‘cultural centre’ and its mission statements do not include any explicit reference to the recovery of Kanak history or the past. Its purpose is “[t]o serve as a fulcrum for developing Kanak artistic creation and a centre for disseminating contemporary Kanak culture in its own inheritance, its actuality and its creativity”. The CCT situates this mission “to affirm and further develop contemporary forms of creative expression” within “the process of re-evaluation and reconciliation presently taking place in New Caledonian society”. It seems that the accent is repeatedly placed on actuality and the present, in silent or implicit opposition to history and the past.

This is not to say that history is ignored altogether - just that it does not figure prominently in spatial or rhetorical terms in the CCT’s permanent exhibition spaces, workshops and outreach activities. Of the two permanent exhibitions, one concerns the life of Jean-Marie Tjibaou and the other contains a small collection of Kanak treasures. The largest exhibition areas are devoted to contemporary Pacific art. This preoccupation with contemporary artistic expression and performance is also shared by Te Papa and the NMA, but the emphasis here is much stronger. This is not to say that history is ignored altogether - just that it does not figure prominently in spatial or rhetorical terms. The CCT does have several sites where historical discourses are contained - a library, a documentation centre and a publication, Mwâ véé - however, the principal sites of historical representation in New Caledonia are to be found outside of the CCT, in the centre of Noumea, at the New Caledonian Museum, the Noumea City Museum and the Bernheim library.

One of the reasons for this orientation lies in the nature of the political agreements between France and New Caledonia’s main pro and anti-independence parties in which the CCT has its origins. The ADCK, the government agency which runs the Cultural Centre, has its origins in the 1988 Matignon Accords in which the French government undertook “to provide for the expression and fulfilment of the Melanesian personality in all its forms” and “to ensure that everyone has access to information and culture”. In the 1998 Noumea Accord the signatories recognised a “Kanak identity”, “the shadows of the colonial period” and the “long-lasting traumatic effect” of colonisation. Yet, in neither document were any of the signatories made to...
confront the colonial past in any detail and nor have they been made to undertake an historical examination of the past as part of the process of rééquilibrage (rebalancing). In fact, the Noumea Accord may actively discourage such a process by urging “the inhabitants of New Caledonia to put violence and rejection behind them”, by initiating a search for symbols of nation and by promoting the codification of custom, the survey of heritage sites and the registration of customary land. [40]

Another reason for the marginalisation of history is the influence exercised by the figure of the late independence leader, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, in whose honour the CCT is named. Tjibaou affirmed that Kanak culture and identity exist in the present and the future and not just in the past. It was the past to which Kanak were often relegated by colonising discourses; colonial history constituted Kanak as outside history or, at best, sought to assimilate Kanak through the narrative of civilization. [41] In these circumstances, some suspicion of history or historians seems warranted. Tjibaou once likened museums to cemeteries for “dead material” and contrasted the “museum which contains/encompasses” such objects with “the land/earth in which genealogies take root”. [42] This was not an outright rejection of the value of the past, but a sense of the historical may have been a casualty. Whereas an earlier Kanak historian, Anova-Ataba, suggested that an historical figure, the Kanak chief Ataï, might be adopted as a national hero by both Kanak and settlers as a symbol of resistance to metropolitan oppression, Tjibaou promoted a figure from Kanak cosmology, Téin Kanaké, and said that settlers had to recognise this identity before they could obtain a ‘Kanak nationality’. [43]

There are many other possible reasons for the comparative absence of history in the CCT. One is the relative poverty of the New Caledonian historiography. There is, as yet, no Kanak history in the sense that one might talk of Aboriginal or Maori history as fields separate from Australian and New Zealand history and it is unlikely that the history of a Kanak tribu or aire culturelle could yet be presented in the same way as the history of Maori iwi is presented at Te Papa. Reconciliation processes have not, as yet, produced new historiographical trends or historical research. It is thus noticeable that the colonial frontier or past conflict is more likely to be evoked in short stories, comic strips or plays than in history books. [44] It is also the case that there are other institutions that might be better placed and resourced to take on historical themes. [45] Finally, there may also be a decision to not engage in the kinds of discourses which promote a French Caledonian nationalism or a Caldoche identity/subjectivity; it should be noted that the CCT was designed to provide a forum for more parochial and creative forms of history making or story-telling: dance, performances and the collection of oral histories. [46]

A play performed at the opening of the CCT in 1998 and a photographic exhibition from April-May 2000 provide two examples of the way that historical discourses are evaded or marginalised and of the dangers involved in this.

Le sentier (The Path), the play performed at the opening of the CCT in 1998 was written by Nicolas Kurtovitch an author, playwright and teacher who claims matrilineal descent from an early French missionary and settler. [47] The play is set within a Kanak village at the beginning of a war between Kanak and settlers. The context is contemporary rather than historical alluding to the violence of the 1980s. This, however, is presented by the Kanak chief as a war “against people who are not our real enemies” and the chief recognizes the irony that “we are only fighting their descendants”. [48] This suggestion that Kanak have been fighting only for their ancestors’ causes, and not their own, is an example of the way that a division between past and present can obscure continuities and enduring colonial structures/situations. [49] By foregrounding this ironic observation and setting the drama within a Kanak village, Kurtovitch appears to make Kanak responsible for explaining or accounting for conflict.

The drama of Le sentier revolves around the fate of a captured European woman. Although she is innocent, her capture is an opportunity for Kanak to pass judgement upon her ancestors, to show determination and win recognition of their identity. This poses a dilemma for the son of the chief who must decide between his love for the woman prisoner and his loyalty to the values of custom upon which he believes his identity and political cause to be based. The arguments which ultimately prevail are those of the settler community, argued by the captive woman, and those of Kanak women, represented by the mother. [50] The drama thus points to the existence of dissenting voices both within and outside the discourse of tradition and the need to look to the present and the future. While these may be concerns which are shared by Kanak, Kurtovitch fails to represent them as anything other than irreconcilable oppositions. There is no exploration of the tensions within the European community. It could be that this is part of a critique of the Kanak invocation of a reified past (or the
search for an ‘authentic’ pre-colonial past), but the effect is to reinforce a discourse of French Caledonian, rather than Kanak, identity which is constructed by building a barrier between the past and the present. In either case it is implied that neither community has anything to gain from a critical understanding of the past.

“Witnesses from Yesterday, Heritage for Tomorrow” (22 April-29 May 2000) was an exhibition of photographs relating to the district of Koné in the North Province. It is one of a series of such exhibitions entitled “New Caledonia: from Town to Village”. Each exhibition “combine[s] contemporary photographs by David Becker with ancient photos and documents from [the ADCK’s] Media library” and “showcases the different communities of New Caledonia, one by one”. The series of exhibitions is part of a project called, New Caledonia As I Saw It 100 Years Ago. The idea is that there will be a major exhibition on the whole of New Caledonia in 100 years Then, the photos will be 100 years old, and will show daily life in the ‘good old days’ at the end of the 20th century.

There are a number of things that can be said about this exhibition. It was simple, immediate and accessible: the photos were displayed on large panels with brief legends/captions and the subjects represented all (or most) ethnic communities. The concept (the juxtaposition of photographs of a particular district separated by more than 100 years) created a sense of continuity linking past, present and, perhaps, future. This demonstrates an active engagement by the ADCK and the photographer, Becker, in both the display and production of heritage. However, the focus was on people, personalities, buildings, places and activities - the only historical event mentioned was an 1881 cyclone. People were shown engaged in everyday activities (horse riding, fishing, weaving, marriage ceremonies), but there was nothing to tell the audience who these people are or were. There were images of a nineteenth century frontier (stockmen, police, settlers and Kanak chiefs), but no context in which to situate them (other than the geographical) and no reminders of its violence.

The photographer’s gaze fixes quotidian moments, objects and heritage sites in its frame. The display situates them in relation to earlier moments and sites (showing continuity and perhaps timelessness of certain traditional activities), but there are no actual histories or stories to go with the pictures. In much the same way, many Kanak are busy fixing ‘custom’, mapping customary sites and reinstituting ‘precolonial’ institutions ignoring the extent to which the intervening period of history has shaped the present is only likely to lead to more conflict within and between communities.

There are many valid reasons for not engaging directly in history - especially that of the colonial period. Nevertheless, we think it is important to ask about the implications or dangers of the choice not to articulate a Kanak history. The most obvious danger is that history as a discursive field, and its critical functions, will be monopolised or invaded by those who wish to articulate a ‘New Caledonian’, rather than ‘Kanak’, history.

d) Comparative conclusions

These three institutions have more than their new facades and waterfront locations in common. All three institutions have tried to stress notions of hybridity, crossfertilisation, and ‘tangled destinies’. Contemporary and performing arts are quite important in all three (especially the CCT and Te Papa, which function as art galleries as well as museums). Considerable attention has been paid to indigenous protocol in the design of the buildings, the organisation of the exhibitions and the development of the performance programmes, more so in Noumea and Wellington than in Canberra. It might be noted that this represents an engagement in ‘political correctness’, yet, more importantly, each institution is situated, to a lesser or greater extent, in both a ‘reconciliation’ process and a process of ‘nation building’. By virtue of their position in relation to these processes (or their engagement with them), they each have developed a particular strategic relationship with history. In Te Papa and the NMA, where the colonial influence is both stronger and more secure, history is integral to the attempt to define and display national identities. Albeit in very different ways, their exhibitions represent the latest phase of historiographic reappraisal, the moment in which academic scholarship tries to meet and to inform social perceptions of history.

Yet, while there is a marked parallelism between these processes, the historical narratives which they have generated also reflect the specific political and institutional differences between them. For example, the bi-culturalism (and bilingualism) of Te Papa might be said to reflect the centrality of the Treaty of Waitangi; the NMA’s treatment of Aboriginal history as separate from that of the nation echoes the contested Mabo judgement; the short shrift given to historical representations of any sort in the CCT reflects the 1998 ‘agreement’ between France and New Caledonia, which talks of the “shadows of the colonial period” without
Each of the three institutions is, in its own right, a potential focus point for debate and criticism, especially with respect to the ongoing debates on the relationship between indigenous history and national histories. In each of these polities, the correlation between historical and public opinions has been the site for an ongoing struggle, and in Australia and New Zealand there is an established tradition of scholars praising the museum of the other country in order to discredit their own. Whereas Australian museum critic Linda Young referred to Te Papa as “pretty fabulous, actually” when describing the controversies that surrounded the opening of NMA, Kerry Howe praised the NMA to highlight his unease about the absences in New Zealand’s public history, political correctness, the ‘nation’s soul’ and the inadequacies of biculturalism.

We are left then with three snapshots. The first is of Te Papa which seems to have firmly embraced a bi-cultural model arranged around the Treaty rather than around the arrival of the New Zealand Company. New Zealanders have embraced this model with their customary zeal for change. The second is of the NMA, where ‘First Australians’ (rather than First Fleeters) have pride of place. Yet, there is no sense in which ‘First Australians’ is integrated with or even juxtaposed against ‘Nation’. Here, our reading of the NMA differs from that which suggests that “bien pensants conceived of the Museum as a way of putting the national story in the context of black territorial possession and dispossession rather than, as is usual, the other war around.” If that was the theory, then it does not seem to have been realised. Treated as an exhibition in its own right, ‘First Australians’ is ground-breaking, but the much talked about ‘Conflict’ display does not interrogate ‘Nation’ nor, for that matter, does ‘Negotiating Coexistence’.

However, this divide is not as great as that which exists in New Caledonia. As shown in the third snapshot of the CCT, there is no engagement with indigenous history or with nation; these issues are avoided altogether. In New Caledonia, it was a matter of establishing an institution capable of dealing with Kanak presence in the context of the policy of rééquilibrage: there was no room for a Caldoche or settler subjectivity in the activity of the Tjibaou centre; the subjectivity of New Caledonians of non-Melanesian origin has to find its expression elsewhere and so must historical discourse.

Te Papa’s synthesis of Maori and Pakeha pasts and its attention to history, the non-communicating parallelism of the historical discourses of the National Museum of Australia, and the non-historical and non-communicating approach of the CCT emerge as three different prototypes of historical representation in a museal context. While the similarities between the three institutions and their mandates allow for a comparative analysis, the marked differences in their curatorial activity correspond to differences in local public concerns. While approaches to the analysis of museal representations may draw “attention to the fundamental similarity between the cultural logic of colonisation” in settler societies, they should also take into account the specific evolution of local historiographies, the debates they have generated and reconciliation processes.

Notes

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[1] For information relating to these institutions and their exhibitions, see their official internet sites: www.nma.gov.au/; www.tepapa.govt.nz/; and www.adck.nc/. (Please note that the ADCK website, hosted by www.canl.nc when this article was composed, has since been replaced by a revised site at adck.nc. Some of the information available on the earlier site is no longer online).

[2] Whereas several other studies or reviews of these institutions have focused primarily on art and contemporary artistic expression in one or more of these institutions, this paper focuses upon history and

[3] See L. Veracini, ‘Negotiating Indigenous Resistance in the South Pacific: Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Kanaky-New Caledonia, Three Cases in Historical Redescription’, PhD thesis, Griffith University, 2001. However, the three historiographical transitions happened in constitutently different ways: in the Australian case, the unresolved nature of national identity in regard to indigenous peoples hindered the establishment of a new interpretation of the country’s colonial past; in New Zealand, the emergence of a clearer bicultural national identity fostered a complete reassessment of the Maori contribution to the national experience; in New Caledonia the coexistence of two conflicting and opposed national identities resulted in two distinct and non-communicating historical discourses.


[5] The Waitangi Tribunal was created in 1975 when the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi as a founding document was reasserted.

[6] The 1988 Matignon Accords ended a period of political unrest and violence between advocates and opponents of independence from France and set a ten year timetable for a referendum on independence. The 1998 Noumea Accord postponed this referendum for a further ten-fifteen years, but guaranteed the gradual, but irreversible, devolution of most state powers from the French government to a local government in New Caledonia.


[10] www.tepapa.govt.nz/ Matauranga Maori is “knowledge and understanding founded on tikanga Maori (Maori custom culture and protocol)”.

[11] The role of the New Zealand Company settlement at Wellington in the foundation of the nation has been downsized dramatically by the historiography of recent decades. While recent interpretative trends have insisted on the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi, earlier narratives identified the foundation of the future capital (far from the ‘turbulent’ and ‘Maorised’ northern frontier) as the truer moment of the colony’s foundation. See W. P. Reeves, The Long White Cloud, London: Allen & Unwin, 1924, p. 141.


[13] Ibid.

Ibid. “The Corporate Principles that underpin the Museum’s operation and outputs are: Te Papa is bicultural - Te Papa provides an environment where both Maori and Pakeha cultures can work co-operatively to achieve the Museum’s Mission. Te Papa is customer focused The needs and expectations of the customer are put first [in fact, and this is a crucial choice, second] and Te Papa will earn an international reputation for services and visitor satisfaction. Te Papa speaks with the authority that arises from scholarship and matauranga Maori - All of Te Papa’s activities will be underpinned by scholarship and matauranga Maori [knowledge and understanding founded on tikanga Maori (Maori custom, culture and protocol)]. Te Papa is commercially positive Te Papa will offer a range of charged-for experiences and products designed to enhance the visitor experience and contribute to the financial viability of the Museum”. This perhaps shows that the entrenchment of ‘difference’ and the process of economic globalisation are not irreconcilable discourses; Te Papa has been defined as “the MTV of museums […] a temple to the short attention span”. As Negri and Hardt have shown, these two developments have historically supported each other. T. Negri, M. Hardt, Empire, Cambridge, Massachussets: Harvard University Press, 2000; and T. Dalrymple quoted in P. Matthews, “Te Papa: The Remake”, Listener, December 1, 2001, p. 51.


See P. Matthews, op. cit., p. 50.

See K. Howe, loc. cit.

www.tepapa.govt.nz/


However, biculturalism may also exclude. Jolly, for instance, has remarked a tension between this biculturalism and multiculturalism: “Te Papa is not a museum that so much affirms indigenous culture and its regional connections as tries (and in my view fails) to negotiate the complexities between the biculturalism of Maori and Pakeha and the multiculturalism appropriate to later migrants from other parts of Europe, the Pacific and Asia”. Jolly, op. cit., p. 448.


www.nma.gov.au/

Ibid. Like Wellington, Canberra is also isolated from the sites of first contact and the foundational sites of nation building.


Our analysis deals primarily with the ongoing exhibitions of the museum. The NMA does deliver some indigenous content through a variety of other media (lectures, talks, broadcasts and web content); yet, we believe the ongoing exhibitions occupy a special position in the museum’s production.

It is important to note that the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, formerly with the Australian National University, has been co-located with the museum. The permanent exhibition of the First Australian Gallery really proposes itself as the state of the art institution for Aboriginal studies.


See “First Australians”, Canberra, National Museum of Australia. In some respects, the symbolic position
given to Batman’s deal is similar to that given to the Treaty of Waitangi at Te Papa. The difference is that the former has not been allowed to shape the overall conceptual or spatial arrangement of the exhibitions.


[36] “As part of the process of re-evaluation and reconciliation presently taking place in New Caledonian society, the *Centre culturel Tjibaou* confirms Kanak cultural identity and affirms its place in the present. When Jean-Marie Tjibaou asked: ‘How can one be Kanak in today’s society?’, it was a challenge he launched at all Kanaks. This challenge is to affirm that Kanak culture thrives in the present. This challenge is for Kanaks to take a desired place in today’s society, and to be known for it. This challenge is to affirm and further develop contemporary forms of creative expression". ([www.canl.nc/noumea.com/jmtjag.htm/](http://www.canl.nc/noumea.com/jmtjag.htm/). This statement reflects the stated objectives of the Association for the Development of Kanak Culture (ADCK), which runs the CCT. These objectives are: to accord full value to the Kanak cultural heritage in all its forms archaeological, ethnographic and linguistic; to encourage contemporary forms of Kanak culture; to promote cultural exchange, especially within the South Pacific region; to define and conduct research programs of value to Kanak culture ([www.canl.nc/noumea.com/jmtjag.htm/](http://www.canl.nc/noumea.com/jmtjag.htm/). This might be compared with the mission statement of Te Papa (www.tepapa.govt.nz/who_we_are/mission.html/): both statements mention “heritage” and “culture”, but only Te Papa says that cultivating an understanding of the past is of importance to the present and the future.

[37] Founded in 1993 by the Association for the Development of Kanak Culture (ADCK), *Mwà Véé, revue culturelle*, provides a public forum for debates concerning written and oral expression, modernity, history and memory, and Kanak, Caledonian, and Vietnamese identity. The *indigénat*, the two World Wars and the 1931 colonial exhibition are some of the historical events which have been examined in *Mwà Véé*. While many of the contributors are historians or students, *Mwà Véé* makes direct use of interviews and oral histories, allowing non-specialists to make important contributions. The ADCK has also been involved in the publication of several history books, for example, J. Dauphiné, *Les debuts d’une colonisation laborieuse: le sud calédonien (1853-1860)*, Paris/Noumea: L’Harmattan /ADCK, 1995.

[38] Matignon Accord, the Agreement on the Future of New Caledonia signed in Paris on 26 June 1988 - Appendix 1: “Finally, to provide for the expression and fulfilment of the Melanesian personality in all its forms, a sustained policy will be applied to ensure that everyone has access to information and culture. To this end, a public establishment, the Kanak Cultural Development Agency will be set up”.

[39] The CCT’s future is guaranteed in the terms of the 1998 Noumea Accord (Section 1.3.5): “The State undertakes to provide, on a long-term basis, the technical assistance and funds required for the Tjibaou Cultural centre to be able to fully play its part as a centre for outreach by Kanak culture. On all these matters pertaining to cultural heritage, the State will propose that a specific agreement be entered into with New Caledonia”. Noumea Accord, (1998), informal translation by the Pacific Community translation services, French Embassy Press and Information Section.

[40] Noumea Accord (1998). Preservation and restoration of “heritage” is one of the principal themes of the
Noumea Accord. Section 1.3 deals with “Cultural Heritage” and states that: “Kanak place names will be compiled and reinstated” and that “[t]he State will facilitate the return to New Caledonia of Kanak cultural material located in museums and collections in mainland France or other countries”. Section 1.4 concerns land and stipulates that customary land is to be ‘surveyed and registered’. Section 1.5 notes that the ‘country’s identity signs name, flag, anthem, design of bank notes will need to be devised in common to express both the Kanak identity and the future in which all will share’.


[42] Ibid., p. 192; Jean-Marie Tjibaou, “Être mélanésien aujourd’hui”, in A. Bensa and E. Wittersheim, (ed.), La présence Kanak, pp. 110-111. Unlike those who drew a line between a savage past to which Kanak no longer belonged and a modern or civilised present and future, Tjibaou invoked custom/tradition as an essential part of being Melanesian or Kanak ‘today’. For an example of a different perspective see: [ANON.], Mélanésiens d’aujourd’hui: la société mélanésienne dans le monde moderne, Noumea: SEHNC, 1976.

[43] A. Anova Ataba, “Deux exemples de réflexions mélanésiennes. 1: L’insurrection des Néo-Calédoniennes en 1878 et la personnalité du grand chef Atai. 2: Pour une économie humaine”, Journal de la Société des Océanistes, 25, 1969, 202; J.-M. Tjibaou, “De l’art à la politique”, in A. Bensa and E. Wittersheim, (ed.), La présence Kanak, p. 201. Atai’s symbolic position might be compared with that of New Zealand’s Hone Heke who has acquired an important position in both Te Papa and the national consciousness. The absence of reference to such historical figures in the CCT may also reflect the dominance of anthropology over history with respect to Kanak. Tjibaou’s vision has become central to that of the French government sponsors of the CCT, advisers such as anthropologist, Alban Bensa, the ADCK and the rising ‘Kanak élite’ the heirs of Tjibaou. Peter Brown has observed that Alban Bensa, adviser to the architect, Renzo Piano, has placed himself in the Union Calédonienne tradition of Tjibaou “promoting the primacy of cultural over political ‘action’”. Brown also notes Bensa’s mistrust of the past and historical discourses the desire to avoid traditionalist or essentialist representations. P. Brown, “Book Review; Ethnologie et architecture: Le Centre Culturel Tjibaou, une réalisation de Renzo Piano”, The Contemporary Pacific, 14:1, 2002, pp. 281-284.


[45] Two examples are the former territorial Museum, the Musée Néo-Calédonien, which is also administered by the ADCK and the Musée de la Ville de Noumea.

[46] In the limited public consultation that took place before the construction of the CCT, Kanak from the North and from Noumea were asked what they hoped to find in the CCT. History does/did figure prominently in these responses. For instance, respondents felt that there should be workshops on: “[t]he history of our place (the general history of each region). […] To find in the history workshop accounts of mourning, marriage and all the events we have at home. How our ancestors lived before and after”. Another group of respondents made the emphasis on histoire in the more informal sense of the creative process of story-telling quite explicit: “They say that it is not their place to invent legends, but that they are going to make stories which they are going to imagine, because the elders have invented the dances, the songs; they must invent things, stories which entertain and which allow others to learn”. A. Bensa (ed.), La réalisation du Centre culturel Jean-Marie Tjibaou: analyses, enquêtes, documentation, Noumea/Paris: Ministère de la Culture, Mission des Grands Travaux, 1992, p.24 and pp. 33-34.


[48] Ibid., p. 20.

[49] The image recalls that of the “two gladiators pushed by an invisible force which is foreign to them, fighting to the death, eyes blindfolded, without really knowing why”. This image was also used by Anova-Ataba to represent the clash between Kanak and settlers in 1878. Anova Ataba, op. cit., pp. 209-210.

[50] The Mother and the female prisoner insist that the men/warriors are “free” and not in the “prison” of the
past in which they imagine themselves to be (p. 31). The Mother encourages her son to follow “desire” and his heart. The young woman pleads that she belongs to the present and is not “a shadow inhabited by ancestors who would come to haunt your nights or oppose themselves to your desires” (pp. 31, 44): “So ready yourself for a life which each day changes a little. Life is neither static nor enchain by the shackles of a past that contains more than divine and infallible laws. Be close to your Mother and offer your people a sympathetic heart” (p. 44). N. Kurtovitch, op.cit.


[52] Ibid.

[53] This echoes the way in which events such as the “Great Insurrection” of 1878 were assimilated, like so many other things Kanak, to the realm of the environment and the category of natural disasters - especially cyclones.


[55] Quoted in P. Matthews, op. cit., p.51; and K. Howe, loc. cit.


[57] N. Thomas, op. cit., p. 301.