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Paying Tribute: Migrant Memorial Walls and the ‘Nation of Immigrants’

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[in Sten Pultz Moslund, Anne Ring Petersen and Moritz Schramm (eds), *The Culture of Migration: Politics, Aesthetics and Histories*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2015, pp. 327-344]

In November 1997, the Australian National Maritime Museum (ANMM) announced their plans to build a Welcome Wall along the museum’s northern boundary on Sydney’s Darling Harbour. A fact sheet explained that the wall would ‘provide settler and immigrant Australians with the opportunity to honour members of their families and friends who travelled to Australia by sea or air and contributed to the growth of our nation’. At the cost of \$100 per listing, all names would have ‘equal prominence’ and be added ‘in order of receipt’(ANMM 1997). Kevin Fewster, who was the director of the ANMM at the time, later wrote:

Inspiration for the project came partly from a similar initiative at Ellis Island, New York, and from the many approaches I had received over the years from migrants who had first landed from ships berthed at the wharves adjacent to the Museum and now, as they grow old, wished to mark the start of their new life in Australia (2000: 43).

The first bronze panels of the Welcome Wall were unveiled in January 1999, and more than 25,000 names have been engraved on the memorial to date.¹ The American Immigrant Wall of Honor at Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York, which opened in 1990, also continues to amass registrations from Americans eager to memorialize their own names, those of their family or their immigrant ancestors. The relationship between these two ‘sites of memory’, each symbolising recent revisions of their nations’ pasts, is the concern of this article. How did the ANMM adapt the American memorial

for an Australian audience? What social, historical and institutional contexts shaped these adaptations? And what can these ‘migrant memorial walls’ tell us about the ways that people understand migration as part of their family histories, personal identities, and their place in the nation?

Nations of Immigrants

The appearance of migrant memorial walls at museum sites in the last two decades is part of a larger trend in museums worldwide, whereby institutions which have traditionally reflected a core national culture and history have responded to community demands and government policy directives to become more representative of their nation’s migrant, multicultural or multiracial populations (Ang 2011: 88-89). Immigration history has been a key theme of these transformations, as it allows for the representation and celebration of many different groups within a cohesive chronology of arrivals. In post-colonial settler nations such as Australia and the United States, this ‘nation of immigrants’ story has become a powerful *national* narrative, underpinning entire museums and pervading public discourses on immigration policy, citizenship and national identity. Even in Europe, the historical continuity of immigration is now used as a way to explain the ever-changing national identities of countries which have until recently preferred to locate their collective history in a shared ethnic heritage. The controversy surrounding the opening of a national museum of immigration in France in 2007, only two years after widespread civil unrest erupted in the poor *banlieues* of Paris (home to many immigrants and their French-born children), speaks to the complex social and political roles that these institutions are expected to play (Green 2007: 239). A movement is currently underway in Britain to establish the nation’s first migration museum, which aims to cast the country’s history as one of movement, mobility and cross-cultural encounters. In many countries throughout the world then, the

answer to ‘who we are’ as a nation is increasingly sought not within the nation’s borders, but without – by explaining ‘where we came from’.²

While a small body of scholarly literature has recently emerged that examines the history of immigration and emigration themes in museums, the memorialisation of migration which has accompanied them remains peripheral to analyses of exhibitions and collections (Henrich 2012, Witcomb 2009, Baur 2009, Goodnow 2008, McShane 2001). Migrant memorial walls, when mentioned, appear as part of broader considerations of museum sites as heritage landscapes, rather than the main subject of research (Desforges & Maddern 2004). In the much larger literature on commemoration and memory, it is the memorialisation of the major wars of the twentieth century which have warranted the most scholarly attention, and thus they dominate our ways of understanding public commemorative practices. This imbalance has inspired recent work on post-1960 ‘non-war’ memorials in Australia by public historians Paul Ashton, Paula Hamilton and Rose Searby (2012). Their four year study of almost 400 memorials identified two ‘overarching themes’ – a growth in ‘spontaneous’ or ‘vernacular memorials’ as a response to sudden bereavement, such as roadside memorials; and the appearance, particularly since the 1980s, of ‘retrospective memorials’. They explain:

Retrospective commemoration refers to the effort of state authorities at all levels to express a more inclusive narrative of the nation as a result of, among other things, multicultural policy, by retrospectively commemorating a wider number of communities and people who have been officially identified as having contributed to Australia’s ‘national development’ (2012: 14).

As the authors note, retrospective memorials (much like migration museums), denote a changing version of the national story, symbolising an attempt to bridge the gap between the official or dominant vision of the nation and the increasingly divergent reality. For individuals or groups seeking a place in the national narrative, involvement in these memorial projects is part of the process of ‘fitting in’ (2012: 24-25). This template for understanding contemporary memorials offers a starting point for grappling with the recent phenomena of migrant memorial walls. However, the relationships between the museums that build these walls, families who pay to be included, and government policies of multiculturalism which underlie them require closer examination. If, as Ien Ang has argued, official narratives of nations expressed through ‘heritage’ can obscure the complex and transnational identities of ‘diasporic communities’, migrant memorial walls may conceal continuing ties to homelands, even as they express a desire to ‘fit in’ (Ang 2011: 87). In order to know more about who seeks representation through these memorials, and what meanings they bring to them, we first need to establish the context in which the memorials were constructed, the functions they serve and the meanings they were designed to convey.

The American Immigrant Wall of Honor

Ellis Island in New York Harbour has been described as an ‘almost mythological site’, represented in film, fiction and music, and visited by thousands of tourists every day (Hoskins & Maddern 2011: 151). During the island’s peak period of operation as an immigration station it was prospective immigrants, not tourists, who arrived daily by the thousands to live and work in the ‘land of the free’. Twelve million people were granted entry into the United States through Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954, and by the 1980s, when plans to restore the island as an immigration museum were gathering momentum, it was estimated that one hundred million Americans could trace their family history to one

of those Ellis Island immigrants (Desforges & Maddern 2004: 447-48). The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, led by the famous American businessman Lee Iococca, devised the 'American Immigrant Wall of Honor' as the focus for a national fundraising campaign that had the site's potential familial connections at its heart. The memorial wall was advertised to the public as a chance to pay tribute to their forebears 'whose hard work and high ideals made this country great' (Smith 1992: 86). But it was not only descendants of Ellis Island arrivals who were invited to contribute – the memorial (and of course, the museum itself) was to be a national space in which the immigrant ancestries of all Americans were honoured and celebrated. At the price of \$100 for a standard inscription, or \$1000, \$5000 or \$10,000 for a longer two-line inscription 'placed specially on the wall', the Foundation expected between 20,000 and 30,000 Americans would take part. They were overwhelmed when over 200,000 people responded, raising more than \$21 million in the process (Heimbuecher, 1990).

Daniel Walkowitz (2009: 139) has noted that Ellis Island represents more than just a collection of many migrant stories - it has 'symbolic meaning to its visitors as a site of national citizenship'. This idea was no doubt shaped by the huge fundraising campaign for the museum, and the commemorative activities that accompanied it. On the museum's opening day, 10 September 1990, fifty immigrants were sworn in as American citizens: 'raising their hands and giving up their allegiance to their homelands' (The Morning Call 1990). Two of these newly-minted Americans, 10-year-old Anthony Boyle from Australia and 12-year-old Shalini Dookhie from Guyana, also helped Lee Iococca to unveil the American Immigrant Wall of Honor. Much of the media coverage of the day centered on elderly Americans, who remembered arriving at Ellis Island as children. These stories played on the poignancy of their return to the site and dramatized the moment when they found their name inscribed on the Wall of Honor (Glave 1990, Shields 1990). The inclusion of two new, young citizens in the unveiling ceremony points to the choreographed continuation of the 'nation of immigrants' story. Having just

renounced any ties to their 'homelands', they, like those who arrived at Ellis Island before them, were born anew. Similarly, although details including 'country of origin', 'year of arrival', 'port of entry' and 'name of ship' can be entered into the database of the Wall of Honor, all that is inscribed on the physical wall is the 'honoree's name', emphasising their American identity and their rebirth as American citizens.

The process of registration for the Wall of Honor has remained virtually unchanged since the late 1980s, with the exception of the move to an online format where internet users can search names and purchase commemorative gifts with the click of a button. However, the physical wall has altered over the years. The first panels, made of copper, were attached horizontally to the top of an existing 951-foot sea wall, about waist height, immediately outside the museum building (Heimbuecher, 1990). All of these names were arranged alphabetically, so those who had registered an immigrant ancestor could easily find their inscription. But even before this wall was unveiled, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island Foundation had decided to extend the fundraiser. Museum design firm Ralph Applebaum Associates was contracted to create a new structure, which transformed the memorial from a sympathetic addition to the existing site, to a dominant feature of the landscape. Located near the original memorial and next to the museum, the 'wall' takes the form of a huge circle with four-foot high shiny steel panels on both sides. Since 1993, when it was opened, new 'editions' of names have been added every two to three years, and there are currently more than 700,000 inscriptions on 749 panels. The memorial's growing size is reflected by its popularity as a visitor attraction in its own right. Erica Rand (2005: 159) has written about her interview with one of the park rangers working at Ellis Island, who told her that after 'Where's the bathroom', 'Where is the Wall of Honor?' was the most frequent question visitors asked.

[FIGURE 1: The original Wall of Honor at Ellis Island, 1990. Reproduced courtesy of Ellis Island Immigration Museum]

[FIGURE 2: The current Wall of Honor at Ellis Island, first unveiled in 1993. Reproduced courtesy of Ellis Island Immigration Museum]

The popularity and high visibility of the American Immigrant Wall of Honor has sparked concerns about how it presents or ‘produces’ history. Some researchers have observed that the authoritative appearance of the wall, like a war memorial, leads many visitors to believe it is a full and historically-accurate list of immigrants who arrived through Ellis Island during its years as an immigration depot, or, conversely, a record of *all* arrivals to the United States (Rand 2005: 161-62, Walkowitz 2009: 144). Cultural geographers Luke Desforges and Joanne Maddern (2004: 448) have pointed out that the Wall of Honor echoes the version of immigration history used in the fundraising campaign headed by Iococca – where ‘the figure of the immigrant is used in an heroic manner to portray American identity in terms of aspirations towards national liberty and the creation of social mobility through self-sacrifice and hard work’. As they demonstrate, many exhibits in the Ellis Island Immigration Museum challenge this simple conflation of migration with American national identity. However, it is the effective mobilization of family history or ancestor-worship underpinning the American Immigrant Wall of Honor that makes it such a powerful and popular part of the museum landscape. For Australian museums who wished to attract a greater number and diversity of visitors in the 1990s, Ellis Island’s American Immigrant Wall of Honor thus represented an exciting opportunity to foster a new audience.

Immigration history at the Australian National Maritime Museum

The circumstances surrounding the construction of Australia's first national memorial to migrants differed in many ways from those surrounding the opening of Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York. Most obvious was the nature of the host institution as a maritime, rather than an immigration museum. Even though immigration history had been an important theme of the museum since it opened in 1991, the types of narratives curators were able to present through a maritime lens were necessarily limited. Objects and stories in the permanent gallery 'Passengers' related to the journeys of migrants, rather than their experiences of settling, living and working in Australia, their ongoing ties to 'home', or the ways different individuals and groups have shaped Australian society and culture. However, one important theme to emerge from the emphasis on sea journeys was the experience of refugees or 'boat people'. The ANMM's acquisition of a Vietnamese refugee boat, 'never owned or sailed by Australians', indicates that curators saw the continuity of the sea journey in Australian history as an opportunity to widen the concept of 'national heritage' (Fewster 2000: 46, Lawton 2006). The resettlement of thousands of Indochinese refugees in Australia in the late 1970s and 1980s had occurred with bipartisan support, amidst the rise of multicultural policy and rhetoric. However curators were keen to challenge the views of 'ignorant social commentators', whose attitudes, 'fuelled by prejudice', had found expression in some popular newspaper coverage.³ These attitudes bubbled away under the surface of multicultural Australia, reemerging with renewed energy in the late 1990s.

When the ANMM announced the building of the Welcome Wall in late 1997, it was in the process of constructing a major new temporary exhibition of Australian immigration history which would cover journeys by sea and air from the first convict arrivals of 1788 to the present. This ambitious project was made possible by funding from the Sydney Organising Committee of the Olympic Games, who chose the exhibition as the major event of their 1998 'A Sea Change' Olympic

Arts Festival. 'A Sea Change' was one of four festivals held in the lead up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, designed to 'leave a legacy of greater awareness and appreciation of Australian culture' (Sydney Morning Herald 1998). Its theme was 'transformations in Australian culture', which chimed perfectly with the story of immigration and increasing cultural diversity that the ANMM wished to tell.

The grand unveiling of the Welcome Wall was planned to coincide with this exhibition, 'Tears, Fears, and Cheers: Immigration to Australia 1788-1998', however delays securing sponsorship to offset the construction costs saw the opening shifted to January 1999 (Fewster 2000: 45-46). The institutional and ideological connection between the exhibition and the memorial warrants a closer look at the context in which both were developed. Exhibition curator Kevin Jones told the audience at a national museums conference in May 1999 that 'Tears, Fears and Cheers' was 'an attempt to produce a major history of immigration to Australia over 210 years and was, I hope, a contribution to Australia's current wrangle with multiculturalism and immigration issues' (Jones 1999: 2). The 'wrangle' he was gesturing towards had erupted in late 1996 following the maiden Parliamentary speech of Pauline Hanson, an independent elected to the seat of Oxley in Queensland. Hanson challenged the broad bipartisan support which the policy of multiculturalism had enjoyed in Australia since the mid-1970s, claiming that 'reverse racism' was disadvantaging 'mainstream Australians' and that the nation was in danger of being 'swamped by Asians'. She went on to found the political party One Nation, which reached its electoral peak in the Queensland State elections of 1998 with approximately 22.7 per cent of the vote (Scalmer 1999: para 3). During the late 1990s, when One Nation's racially-fuelled rhetoric was splashed across the national news on an almost daily basis, those with a keen eye to the nation's past pointed out that Hanson's grievances sprang from an older conception of Australia as a racially homogenous white British nation (Cochrane 1996). To cut through the media-hype of Hanson's crude rhetoric, and to assert their position as an impartial, non-partisan and trustworthy institution, the

ANMM changed the advertising campaign for their new exhibition to the slogan 'Migration: Get the Facts' (Fewster 2000: 42).

The main message of the 'Tears, Fears and Cheers' exhibition was that 'most Australians are descended from immigrants' (Jones 1999: 4). It was informed by formative audience evaluation conducted by the museum in May 1997, which revealed that the public tended to equate 'immigrants' with post-war, non-British arrivals. Earlier arrivals were thought of as 'settlers' – a dichotomy that was concerning as it perpetuated notions of 'Australians' as descendants of white pioneers, and 'immigrants' as being somehow less-Australian (Fewster 2000: 39). Curators decided to stress the historical continuity of immigration to Australia, and cast the story as 'one of history's great migrations', in order to gently challenge these assumptions and lend equal legitimacy to all eras of arrival.⁴ In adopting this 'nation of immigrants' approach, curators used Ellis Island Immigration Museum as a model. The opening 'Profiles of Australia' part of 'Tears, Fears and Cheers' drew heavily on the statistical presentation of immigration history through three dimensional graphs that had been used in Ellis Island's 'Peopling of America' exhibition. The second part of the exhibition, featuring recreations of migrant ships and accommodation, included some interactive elements that were adapted from Ellis Island (Henrich 2012: 248-53). The other place where Ellis Island's influence was evident was in the decision to build a migrant memorial wall. Given the immediate social and institutional context, it is easy to see why this idea was so attractive - an American Immigrant Wall of Honor-style memorial would fit perfectly with the message of 'Tears, Fears and Cheers', visually 'equalizing' all arrivals, both 'settler' and 'immigrant'. It also complemented one of the exhibition aims – to attract more families and visitors of a non-English speaking background to the museum (Jones 1999: 2).

The Welcome Wall

[FIGURE 3: The Welcome Wall at the Australian National Maritime Museum, Darling Harbour. Reproduced courtesy of the Australian National Maritime Museum]

Unlike Ellis Island, Australia does not have one major port of arrival for its immigrants in any one period. Those searching for Australia's equivalent of Ellis Island often settle on Station Pier in Melbourne, which has the longest continuous history of use as a passenger pier in Australia. Nevertheless, there were some site-specific connections that strengthened the commemorative power of a migrant memorial wall at the ANMM. The location of the museum on Sydney's Darling Harbour, opposite the docks where passenger ships arrived during the peak period of Australia's post-war migration program, was important to many who paid the \$100 registration fee to have their names or their family's names included on the memorial. Darling Harbour is also around the headland from Sydney Cove, the place where the first British penal settlement was established in 1788, so the descendants of those early settlers (both convict and free), also had potential connections to the site. Following the announcement of the Welcome Wall project, people identifying with both of these groups approached the ANMM to request a special reference to their history on the memorial. But as Fewster has written, 'rightly or wrongly', no group was given 'special treatment... by treating all migrants, regardless of ethnic origin or date of arrival, as equal we hope the Welcome Wall can help us all realise and accept that Australia is a nation of migrants' (2000: 45).

The 'nation of immigrants' story was not only conveyed through the rows of registered names, but through 31 quotes inscribed onto the bronze panels at various points. These personal insights, 'from travellers of many nationalities, including the people who already lived here', function to communicate the human dimension of migration through emotions of grief, loss, apprehension, and disappointment,

as well as excitement, relief and joy.⁵ A central plaque on the 100-metre-long wall sets the story of immigration to Australia within a longer history of Indigenous ownership of land, stating that ‘more than six million people... have come from most countries on earth to the lands of the Cadigal, the Burraburragal and beyond’.⁶ Australia’s Governor General, Sir William Deane, told the crowds at Welcome Wall’s unveiling that this inscription ‘invites us to reflect on the effects of dispossession’ and ‘reminds us that long before the 211 years of European settlement this land was occupied’ (Richards 1999: 10). At the time, legal battles to secure Aboriginal land rights, the uncovering of past government practices of child removal, and an ongoing reconciliation movement urging a national apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples had all ‘unsettled’ the proud, nation-building narrative that many settler Australians had grown up believing (Attwood 2005: 34). Of course, by representing Australia as a ‘nation of immigrants’ the Welcome Wall could also be seen to convey a positive and comforting tale, one that perpetuates, rather than challenges, notions Australian history as ‘progressive and benign’ (Ashton 2009: 381, Pugliese 2002). To address this tension, the ANMM incorporated an Indigenous perspective on immigration where possible. At the opening ceremony it was a representative of the original inhabitants of the Sydney region, Colin Gale, who welcomed guests to the site. Matthew Doyle, an Aboriginal musician and dancer, performed a song in Tharawal (an Aboriginal language), which ‘welcomed all people who have come to Australia from across the seas’ (Richards 1999: 10). And one of the quotes inscribed on the Welcome Wall is from a local Aboriginal family, representing ‘the people who already lived here’. Whether we see these gestures as tokenistic or valuable in their symbolism, they do indicate an important adaptation of the American migrant memorial wall – not all Australians were cast as descendants of immigrants. The decision to establish a ‘Welcome Wall’, rather than an ‘Australian Immigrant Wall of Honour’, encapsulates the distinction.

Another important adaptation was listing names in the order they were registered – or ‘first in, best dressed’ – rather than arranging them alphabetically or privileging those who could afford to donate greater amounts. This organising principle worked to infuse the memorial with celebrated ‘Australian’ values such as the ‘fair go’, easing the shift in the national story away from the defence of homogeneity and towards an acceptance of diversity. Newspaper coverage of the opening ceremony in January 1999 echoed these values, by juxtaposing family stories of discovering convict ancestors with personal accounts of migration. One article (Lee 1999) focused on the story of Salomea Mandla, who migrated to Sydney from Silesia in Eastern Europe in 1952. Her daughter had registered Salomea’s name for ‘one simple reason: “Because I love my mother and I don’t know a more patriotic Australian”’. Patrick Keighran, a convict transported to Sydney in 1796, was also registered on the wall as a gift from daughter to parent ‘by his seventimes removed great granddaughter as a birthday present to her father, Joseph, who has taken to tracing the family history in his retirement’. The article concluded that each inscription represented ‘just another Australian story’.

The Virtual Welcome Wall and ‘micro-family histories’

On the surface, the process of registering a family member, friend or immigrant ancestor on the Welcome Wall appears identical to that of the American Immigrant Wall of Honor. In both cases all that is necessary to complete a registration is a name and payment of \$100. Families have the option to include more details of the person they are commemorating, including their date of arrival and country of origin, and this information is stored on a database that is made available at computer terminals in the museum, and online. But the Welcome Wall registration process includes an ‘optional extra’ – the chance to submit a 50 word story about the person registered.

This marked a significant departure from the American model. By allowing subscribers to add a story to the name, the Welcome Wall became more than a physical memorial – it also became a tool for the collection of family histories. Writing in 2000, Fewster envisioned the database becoming ‘a veritable cyber cemetery’(44). Browsing the entries online today is, in a sense, akin to wandering through a cemetery whilst reading gravestone inscriptions. In both cases, it is the family of the person memorialised who give meaning to the person’s life through their choice of words. However, the Welcome Wall also includes people who have registered their own names, those of their children and those of living parents and grandparents. Rather than somber tributes, these ‘micro-family histories’ are confident expressions of identity and belonging. Not all subscribers choose to submit a story, but those who do reveal not just historical details of the person or family named, but clues as to why memorializing that person’s migration was important to them.

In the text-based online version of the Welcome Wall, a keyword search by surname, given name, country of origin, place first settled or occupation will bring up a list of names – clicking on one opens up the record of all the details submitted during the registration process. The newer ‘Virtual Welcome Wall’ allows the internet user to zoom in on a representation of the wall itself, making it easier to browse the panels and access stories without entering a search term. Searching the surname ‘Jones’ predictably brings up pages of records, including the story of Edwin, who was transported to Australia in 1833 along with his brother for housebreaking.⁷ All available data fields of the entry are carefully filled out, suggesting a family historian has decided to make a lasting and accurate historical record of their ancestor. Another entry tells a story of repeated return migration:

Frank and Kathy Jones arrived in Sydney with their daughters, Carolyn and Rhian. They returned to Liverpool in 1968, had their son, Dafydd, and returned to Sydney in 1972. They now have 6 Australian grandchildren...⁸

Such a non-linear migration experience, typical of the ‘ten pound poms’ who came to Australia through assisted passage schemes in the post-war period, defies the simplicity of the migrant memorial wall system. But whoever submitted this story felt it important to explain the multiple arrivals and departures, as well as naming all six grandchildren, ‘Australian’ by virtue of their grandparents’ decision to return.

The themes of migrant success and commitment to Australia run through numerous entries in the Welcome Wall database: ‘he always applauded his migration to this country and embraced the Australian way of life’ ... ‘they lived in migrant hostels, worked hard and advanced in their careers until they achieved their dream’ ... ‘six second generation grandchildren. Proud Aussies one and all!’.⁹ Sometimes the very act of registering a name reveals a desire to belong. One entry states simply: ‘This is for my wife who has been in Australia 4 years and it will make her feel part of Australia’.¹⁰ Many others record a migrant’s contribution to Australia through their involvement in community organisations and maintenance of cultural traditions. In her entry Azam Sagvand wrote about the Persian Cultural and Social Association that she founded with her husband, and of her daughters who were ‘raised as “True Blue” Aussies, while aware of their Persian culture and heritage’.¹¹

But other entries make no mention of migration at all:

Charles Ah Ching and Agness Crang married in Townsville in January 1886. They had ten children. One died in infancy. Agness and her five youngest children were murdered on

their farm in Alligator Creek near Mackay. The murderer was hanged at Boggo Road Gaol in April 1912.¹²

This family story of unimaginable loss and grief, memorialized by a grandson almost a century later, sits uncomfortably within the positive ‘nation of immigrants’ style of the Welcome Wall. But, like the previous examples, Ah Ching’s entry is evidence of a desire to commemorate a family’s history, a desire which was fulfilled through the memorial project.

The commemorative practices enacted around the Welcome Wall also differ from those at the American Immigrant Wall of Honor. The American memorial operates on a much larger scale, accumulating registrations sometimes for a number of years before adding them to the wall, and the 1990 unveiling and accompanying citizenship ceremony has not been repeated for subsequent additions. Conversely, the ANMM organises unveiling ceremonies for the Welcome Wall twice a year, where those who have registered a name are invited to attend. Each ceremony features a well-known Australian who speaks about their immigrant ancestry or their own immigration experience alongside one of the participants who has registered a name. There are musical interludes, speeches from community representatives and at the conclusion of the proceedings, everyone is asked to stand as the national anthem, ‘Advance Australia Fair’ is sung. These occasions are important public events for the museum, and for many families. At a recent ceremony in November 2012, one man who came with his family to see his father’s name added to the wall told journalists: ‘It’s nice that so many people who would otherwise be covered with a cloak of anonymity have their story and their name unveiled. It’s a personal thing... it probably means more than anything’ (Australian Associated Press 2012).

[FIGURE 4: A Welcome Wall unveiling ceremony in 2002. Reproduced courtesy of the Australian National Maritime Museum]

The Welcome Wall ceremonies are certainly celebrations of a modern, multicultural Australia which retrospectively commemorate those who have contributed to the nation. By inviting immigrants and their descendants to add their names to the national story, albeit a ‘newer’ version, the project assimilates an imagined ‘them’ into a communal ‘us’, reiterating national boundaries and the role of the national state in shaping identities. But the addition of publicly accessible ‘micro-family histories’ online has enabled the wall to play host to personal and familial stories that inadvertently push the limits of the ‘national’. As many entries on the Virtual Welcome Wall attest, migrating to a new country does not imply a linear transition from one nationality or identity to another (quite unlike the shedding of allegiances described at the Ellis Island opening ceremony). Rather, as oral historian Alistair Thomson (1999: 24) has written, the ‘physical passage of migration from one place to another’ is just ‘one event within a migratory experience which spans old and new worlds and which continues throughout the life of the migrant and into subsequent generations’. For those who choose to participate in the memorial, these links to ‘home’, or ‘homelands’, are not incompatible with a desire to belong as Australians.

Conclusion

The American Immigrant Wall of Honor and the Welcome Wall at the ANMM are both participatory memorial projects which visually represent a celebratory ‘nation of immigrants’ story. They share the fundamental limitation of only being able to represent those who identify positively with the story, and are willing and able to pay for their inclusion. There are lessons here for the new migration museums of European nation states, especially regarding migrants who pass through temporarily, arrive unwanted, or face deportation. Are they too part of the story of immigration? Can those who left, or never safely arrived, be memorialized alongside those who stayed? While there are community memorials in

Australia that aim to represent these people, they remain separate from migrant memorial walls, and tell a different and unsettling story (Gibbings 2010; Finnimore 2006).

Beyond their shared aspects, there are important differences between the two migrant memorial walls analysed here which reflect the priorities of their institutions at the time they were constructed. For the Ellis Island-Statue of Liberty Foundation, the priority was to raise money for the establishment of a new national museum by encouraging Americans to discover their immigrant ancestries. An uncomplicated story of nation-building by immigrants transformed into citizens was thus employed for its wide appeal. But for the ANMM, the Welcome Wall was not purely a fundraising activity. It was a project that aimed to attract a new audience to the museum by promoting a positive idea of Australia as a nation of immigrants, while acknowledging the special place of Indigenous Australians as prior owners and ongoing custodians of the land. Along with the ‘Tears, Fears and Cheers’ exhibition that accompanied it, this memorial was also designed to gently challenge prevalent assumptions about who is Australian, who is a migrant, and who ‘belongs’.

Most importantly, the adaptation of the Ellis Island migrant memorial wall for an Australian context almost ten years later gave participants more room to tell their own stories. As a result, it reveals the ongoing intergenerational impacts of migration, and how migrants and their descendants tell and re-tell family histories in order to make sense of their personal identities and their place in the nation. The Virtual Welcome Wall has the potential to express identities that extend beyond geographical boundaries or national narratives. Yet it also allows people to write themselves into those narratives of nation, by articulating their own ways of being Australian.

¹ The Welcome Wall is not alone in Australia’s memorial landscapes. A Tribute Garden opened as part of Melbourne’s Immigration Museum in 1998 features the names of 7000 immigrants, paid for by family members or descendants. The

Western Australian Museum began a Welcome Walls project at Victoria Quay in Fremantle in 2004, initially planning to display 2000 names. However, public interest was so strong that the initial project was extended twice, and by its conclusion in December 2010 more than 21,000 inscriptions had been accommodated (See <http://www.museum.wa.gov.au/welcomewalls/construction>). And at the Bonegilla Migrant Experience, a museum and heritage site interpreting a former post-war migrant hostel in north east Victoria, relatives of ex-residents are currently being invited to ‘help build a wall of memories’ by purchasing a memorial plaque for a Tribute Wall (See <http://www.bonegilla.org.au/tribute/whatisit.asp>).

² See the Migration Museum Project website. Available <http://www.migrationmuseum.org/> (3 April 2013).

³ Sue Effenberger, ‘Note to Interactive Committee, Voyage from Vietnam subtheme’, 6 July 1990, File E02.0386 Exhibitions: Passengers, Development of Audio Visuals and Computer Interactives, Australian National Maritime Museum.

⁴ The phrase ‘one of history’s great migrations’ was used in the introductory panel of the ‘Tears, Fears and Cheers’ exhibition in 1998. Australian National Maritime Museum, ‘Tears, Fears and Cheers, final theme, story and object labels’, Draft 4, 4 March 1998, File 2099.0580/3, ANMM Archives. The same phrase is still used on the Welcome Wall website. See <http://welcomewall.anmm.gov.au/> (8 April 2013).

⁵ This description is quoted from an unauthored photo caption in the museum’s magazine. See *Signals: Quarterly Newsletter of the Australian National Maritime Museum* 38 (March-May 1997), p.2.

⁶ The Cadigal (or Gadigal) and the Burraburragal (also Birribirragal) refer to Aboriginal groups who occupied areas around Sydney Harbour at the time of British colonization, and whose descendants are now recognised as the traditional owners of those lands.

⁷ ‘Edwin Jones’, Panel 27, Column 2, Line number 48, Welcome Wall database. Online. Available <http://welcomewall.anmm.gov.au/> (8/03/2013).

⁸ ‘Frank Owain Jones’, Panel 24, Column 2, Line 39, Welcome Wall database. Online. Available <http://welcomewall.anmm.gov.au/> (8/03/2013).

⁹ ‘Vittorio Cecchin’, Panel 67, Column 1, Line number 138; ‘Bernard Machin’, Panel 63, Column 1, Line number 80; ‘Ann Whibley-Jones’, Panel 9, Column 1, Line number 73, Welcome Wall database. Online. Available <http://welcomewall.anmm.gov.au/> (8/03/2013).

¹⁰ ‘Zulitah Barail’, Panel 47, Column 2, Line number 6, Welcome Wall database. Online. Available <http://welcomewall.anmm.gov.au/> (8/03/2013).

¹¹ ‘Azam Sagvand’, Panel 28, Column 2, Line number 106, Welcome Wall database. Online. Available <http://welcomewall.anmm.gov.au/> (8/03/2013).

¹² ‘Charles Ah Ching’, Panel 2, Column 1, Line number 10, Welcome Wall database. Online. Available <http://welcomewall.anmm.gov.au/> (8/03/2013).

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