

Aztecs at Our Place:

Meaning-making in an international touring exhibition

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Abstract

While it is claimed that international touring exhibitions are highly valuable in terms of promoting intercultural understanding, there is little empirical evidence to support this claim. In particular, there is a lack of visitor research on the subject. “Aztecs at Our Place” addresses this current lack of knowledge by seeking to provide an insight into the impact of touring exhibitions on their audiences. It examines the ways visitors to the exhibition *Aztecs: Conquest and glory* built impressions and “made meaning” about an unfamiliar culture. The exhibition was on display at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) from 28 September 2013 to 9 February 2014. It was developed by Te Papa in partnership with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico, and the Australian Museum and Museum Victoria. From Te Papa, the exhibition travelled to Melbourne Museum and then the Australian Museum in Sydney. This dissertation studies the visitor experience at Te Papa only but forms part of a broader study which examines two exhibitions across several international venues.

“Aztecs at Our Place” draws on recent theoretical and methodological developments in the field of visitor studies including visitor meaning-making, narrative-based methods and long-term visitor insights. The study employed a qualitative research methodology, centering on narrative-based interviews with twenty-three visitors to the exhibition. Follow-up interviews were conducted with eleven of the original participants in order to determine visitors’ lasting impressions of the exhibition. The findings reveal how participants’ impressions of Aztec culture were informed by different aspects of the exhibition. Information and objects relating to everyday life were essential for creating a broader, more sympathetic understanding of Aztec culture beyond human sacrifice. The research also demonstrates that cultural comparisons, objects and emotions including empathy helped participants gain an appreciation for the Aztec way of life, in conjunction with aspects of participants’ identity.

The findings shed new light on the way visitors “connect” to another culture through experiencing an international touring exhibition. Considering that cultural diplomacy is reportedly growing in importance, this research has implications for museum professionals seeking to promote intercultural understanding through an exhibition.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

The *Aztecs: Conquest and glory* exhibition was developed by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (sometimes marketed as Our Place, and hereafter referred to as Te Papa) in collaboration with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) in Mexico, Museum Victoria and the Australian Museum. It was displayed at Te Papa from 28 September 2013 to 9 February 2014 and is an example of an international touring exhibition. International touring exhibitions are nothing new; they have been around nearly as long as museums themselves. Despite this, research into international touring exhibitions is lacking, particularly in terms of visitor research. This dissertation is a response to the lack of existing research.

“Aztecs at Our Place” is a visitor research study, investigating how visitors to *Aztecs: Conquest and glory* (*Aztecs*) experienced Aztec culture through the exhibition. It studies the impressions visitors gained of the Aztecs and of Mexico more generally, and investigates the ways visitors “made meaning” about Aztec culture. A key motivating factor for this study is the hope that it will make a contribution to the understanding of the impact of touring exhibitions on their audiences. Following a qualitative research methodology, the study employs in-depth narrative-based interviews in order to achieve this aim.

The second motivating factor for this dissertation was the opportunity to contribute to a much larger study. “Aztecs at Our Place” presents one part of a long-term, transnational research project, led by Dr Lee Davidson, which explores both *Aztecs* and its exchange partner, *E Tū Ake: Standing Strong*. The exchange was the first between New Zealand and Mexico. *E Tū Ake: Standing Strong* was developed by Te Papa and toured France, Mexico and Canada. The larger study aims to determine the extent to which touring exhibitions contribute to cultural understanding between countries and how this objective can best be achieved. It examines “how the forms of encounter and associated interpretive performances shift as an exhibition moves

between different cultural, political and institutional contexts.”¹ *Aztecs* travelled to Melbourne Museum and the Australian Museum, however this dissertation, unlike the broader project, focusses solely on the visitor experience at Te Papa. This introductory chapter provides context by describing previous Aztec exhibitions, the exhibition at the centre of this study, and the literature which informs the research.

Previous Aztec exhibitions

Literature on previous Aztec exhibitions reveals a history of cultural institutions in Mexico collaborating with overseas museums to produce exhibitions across a range of genres. In 1992, the Denver Museum of Natural History, the Templo Mayor Museum in Mexico City and the Mesoamerican Archives at University of Colorado collaborated to create the anthropological exhibition *Aztec: The World of Moctezuma*.² Anthropologist Frances Berdan praised the exhibition for stressing cultural themes over the artistic merit of the artefacts, and for presenting the everyday life of the Aztec people in their urban setting.³ Berdan also approved of the “expert blending of cultural context and material artifact.”⁴ From her perspective, the anthropological focus of the exhibition was a success.

Another anthropological exhibition, *Aztec World* at Field Museum of Chicago, on display in 2008–2009, aimed to “promote an understanding of Aztec culture in all its diversity through the display and interpretation of Aztec artifacts.”⁵ Its curators criticised two art-focussed Aztec exhibitions, *Aztec Empire* at the Guggenheim in New York in 2004–2005 and *Aztecs* at London’s Royal Academy of Arts in 2002–2003. They believed that the two exhibitions’ emphasis on aesthetic qualities had an

¹ Lee Davidson, “Border Crossings and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Touring Exhibition: An Aotearoa New Zealand – Mexico Exchange,” in *Transpacific Americas: Encounters and Engagements between the Americas and the South Pacific*, ed. Eveline Dürr and Philipp Schorch (Routledge, forthcoming).

² Jane Stevenson Day, “Aztec: The World of Moctezuma, An Exhibition With Multiple Voices,” *Museum Anthropology* 18, no. 3 (1994): 31.

³ Frances F. Berdan, “Aztec: The World of Moctezuma. Denver Museum of Natural History (September 26, 1992–February 21, 1993.),” *Museum Anthropology* 17, no. 1 (1993): 69.

⁴ Berdan, “Aztec: The World of Moctezuma. Denver Museum of Natural History (September 26, 1992–February 21, 1993.),” 74.

⁵ Elizabeth Brumfiel and John K. Millhauser, “Representing Tenochtitlan: Understanding Urban Life by Collecting Material Culture,” *Museum Anthropology* 37, no. 1 (2014): 6.

adverse outcome: “it focussed too much attention on the role of ruling elites in Aztec society” which led to a “narrow, stereotyped view of Aztec society and culture.”⁶

Similarly, anthropologist George F. Lau noted that the Royal Academy’s *Aztecs* exhibition failed to cover residential life and lacked panel commentary to contextualise aspects of Aztec religion. Although he admired the “stunning array” of objects in the exhibition, he feared that “the stereotypes of a savage culture and of dark, grisly ceremonies linger. We are left to wonder whether this is an exposition, celebration, or domestication of blood sacrifice within the Royal Academy.”⁷ Gorji also writes about *Aztecs* at the Royal Academy, noting that because the exhibition was in an art gallery rather than a museum of anthropology, “visitors were encouraged to value the objects on display in terms of a Western ideology of the aesthetic.”⁸ Gorji states that “we might consider the whole exhibition in terms of encounter, not only between two civilisations, but also between competing meaning systems, art and anthropology. The objects on display were at once familiar and foreign.”⁹

Silbermann’s Master’s thesis investigates how exhibitions portray Aztec sacrificial rituals, and focusses on the Royal Academy’s *Aztecs* exhibition, as well as *The Aztec Empire* at the Guggenheim and *Moctezuma: Aztec ruler* at the British Museum in 2009–2010. Silbermann studied reviews of the three exhibitions and found that they were largely negative, particularly in regard to human sacrifice. Reviewers used phrases such as “revoltingly inhumane and despicable”, “aesthetically hideous” and “human evil.”¹⁰ Influenced by Karp,¹¹ Silbermann argues that providing context about the objects displayed is key to avoiding cultural bias and allowing the visitor to rearrange their pre-existing knowledge.¹² These previous Aztec exhibitions raise questions about the effect of different exhibition genres on representing a country abroad, particularly in terms of visitor meaning-making.

⁶ Brumfiel and Millhauser, “Representing Tenochtitlan: Understanding Urban Life by Collecting Material Culture,” 6.

⁷ George F. Lau, “*Aztecs*. Royal Academy of Arts, London. November 16, 2002–April 11, 2003,” *American Anthropologist* 105, no. 3 (2003): 626.

⁸ Mina Gorji, “The Savage in Our City: Interrogating Civility at the Royal Academy,” *Third Text* 18, no. 1 (2004): 41.

⁹ Gorji, “The Savage in Our City: Interrogating Civility at the Royal Academy,” 43.

¹⁰ N. V. Silbermann, “Aztec Human Sacrifices and the Museum Exhibitions” (Master’s thesis, Leiden University, 2012), 49.

¹¹ Ivan Karp, “Culture and Representation,” in *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

¹² Silbermann, “Aztec Human Sacrifices and the Museum Exhibitions,” 49.

Aztecs: Conquest and glory



Figure 1.1 The beginning of the exhibition. Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

Developing international touring exhibitions is common practice among large museums. Te Papa produces touring exhibitions to enhance the museum's international reputation and develop relationships with major overseas museums. In the 2013/14 financial year, three Te Papa exhibitions travelled to six venues in America, Canada and China.¹³ International partnerships allow Te Papa to share New Zealand's natural and cultural heritage and build relationships for future exchanges.¹⁴ The *Aztecs* exhibition was advertised as a “blockbuster,”¹⁵ testament to the fact that international touring exhibitions at Te Papa are often hugely popular among both local and out-of-town audiences. Davidson and Sibley note that “once in a lifetime” blockbuster exhibitions at Te Papa are “of particular importance to a population that suffers from the tyranny of distance in relation to the world's major cultural

¹³ Te Papa, *Te Pūrongo ā Tau Annual Report 2013/14* (Wellington, New Zealand: Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, 2014), 19.

¹⁴ Te Papa, *Te Pūrongo ā Tau Annual Report 2013/14*, 19.

¹⁵ “Aztecs: Conquest and Glory,” *Ticketek*, accessed 23 September, 2013, <http://premier.ticketek.co.nz/shows/show.aspx?sh=AZTECS14#.Uk0wD5jOFFI>.

institutions.”¹⁶ This was certainly the case with *Aztecs*—its objects travelled more than 11,000 kilometres to reach New Zealand audiences.



Figure 1.2 A case of objects with the model Templo Mayor in the background. Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

With its focus on a culture so unfamiliar to the majority of its visitors, *Aztecs* provided the perfect opportunity to study how visitors make meaning and interpret another culture within an international touring exhibition. New Zealanders tend to know little about Aztec culture. Te Papa’s formative evaluation of the exhibition concept, based on focus groups, found that only three of the forty-four participants could accurately place the Aztec Empire in place and time.¹⁷ A summative evaluation revealed that of 193 surveyed visitors, more than three quarters stated they had “no real knowledge” (23%) or only a “basic understanding” (56%) of the Aztecs before seeing the exhibition.¹⁸ The exhibition featured more than 200 objects loaned from cultural institutions in Mexico. Some of the objects were recently unearthed and had

¹⁶ Lee Davidson and Pamela Sibley, “Audiences at the “New” Museum: Visitor Commitment, Diversity and Leisure at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa,” *Visitor Studies* 14, no. 2 (2011): 190.

¹⁷ Stephen Owen and Joy Svendsen, ““Aztecs’ Front End/Formative Evaluation. Stage One Qualitative [Focus Group] Findings. Final Report,” Te Papa Visitor & Market Research Unit, 2012, 9.

¹⁸ Stephen Owen, “Aztecs: Conquest and Glory VMR Wrap Report,” Te Papa Visitor & Market Research Unit, 2014.

never been seen outside of Mexico.¹⁹ It was the first time any of the objects had been to Australasia. *Aztecs* also featured a 1:10 scale model of the Templo Mayor (Figure 1.2), which visitors could enter to learn about Aztec beliefs surrounding death and the afterlife.

The exhibition was developed to appeal to a cross-generational audience with limited prior knowledge of the Aztecs.²⁰ It had an anthropological rather than art historical focus, and aimed to represent Aztec culture in a way that reflected society as a whole and would “encompass all aspects of this imperialistic society.”²¹ The exhibition covered religion, creation of the Empire, the economic system and social structure, including family and education. It aimed to reflect the “spectacular, complex, and ultimately tragic rise and fall of the Aztec civilisation.”²² Tracing the history of the Aztec Empire from its founding up until the Spanish conquest, the exhibition concluded with a small section addressing the contemporary relevance of Aztec culture. Te Papa Concept developer Jeff Fox had hoped to include more about the legacy of the Aztecs, seeing it as consistent with Te Papa’s aim “to make history relevant to people now.”²³ However, resource constraints and the fact that the scope of the exhibition was already so large meant that the “Aztec Legacy” section remained small.²⁴

Te Papa curator Lynette Townsend wanted to develop an exhibition that “the Mexica²⁵ would be proud of.”²⁶ According to Davidson, “Townsend and her team endeavoured to tell a story ‘on behalf of’ the Mexica by meeting INAH’s objectives of presenting the ‘complete’ culture and by adopting a perspective that presented, as far as possible, their distinctive worldview.”²⁷ Te Papa staff aimed to be as “non-judgemental”, “respectful” and “balanced” as possible, and avoid sensationalising

¹⁹ Te Papa, “Aztecs 60% Concept Design, Presentation to Australian Museum and Melbourne Museum, 26 November 2012.”

²⁰ Te Papa, “Aztecs 60% Concept Design.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Davidson, “Border Crossings and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Touring Exhibition: An Aotearoa New Zealand – Mexico Exchange.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Mexica” is another term for Aztecs.

²⁶ Davidson, “Border Crossings and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Touring Exhibition: An Aotearoa New Zealand – Mexico Exchange.”

²⁷ Ibid.

human sacrifice for dramatic effect. The sacrifice element of Aztec culture was balanced with aspects of everyday life.

Literature review

The following review outlines the key areas of literature that have shaped this study. It moves from the general to the most specific, beginning with literature on cultural diplomacy in order to provide wider context for the study. This is followed by a section on international touring exhibitions, which highlights the gap in the literature that this dissertation aims to address. Next, the review discusses visitor research. It provides a brief history of the field, including recent methodological and theoretical developments, particularly in regard to visitor meaning-making which is central to this study. The review ends by highlighting the meaning-making literature which has directly informed this research. Together, these sections of the review set the scene for a visitor research study centering on visitor meaning-making and its implications for intercultural understanding.

Cultural diplomacy and the museum

In order to provide wider context for this study into an international touring exhibition, the review begins with cultural diplomacy and the way it relates to museums. Culture provides meeting points for exposition and explanation, for dialogue and debate.²⁸ According to Grincheva, cultural diplomacy “implies the use of the art of diplomacy in promoting culture resulting in a potential greater awareness of each other’s cultural backgrounds.”²⁹ Culture is used in this way to promote a country’s interests in economic, political and strategic fields.³⁰ Cultural diplomacy can be used for idealistic objectives such as enhancing mutual understanding or combating stereotyping, as well as more functional objectives including advancing a broad range of national interests.³¹ Cultural diplomacy is growing in importance. As a means by which to understand others, culture has an increasingly vital role to play in international relations, and future alliances are equally likely to be forged along lines

²⁸ Kirsten Bound et al., *Cultural Diplomacy* (London: Demos, 2007), 27.

²⁹ Natalia Grincheva, “Cultural Diplomacy 2.0: Challenges and Opportunities in Museum International Practices,” *Museum and Society* 11, no.1 (2013): 39.

³⁰ Grincheva, “Cultural Diplomacy 2.0: Challenges and Opportunities in Museum International Practices,” 39.

³¹ Simon L. Mark, “Rethinking Cultural Diplomacy: The Cultural Diplomacy of New Zealand, the Canadian Federation and Quebec,” *Political Science* 62, no. 1 (2010): 65.

of cultural understanding as they are on economic or geographic ones.³² In Schneider's view, culture, arts, and media "yield indispensable insight into other countries."³³ She states that cultural diplomacy and exchanges have the potential to "increase understanding, shatter stereotypes, and change the way people view each other, which ultimately can lead to changes in the way governments interact."³⁴

The role of museums in promoting intercultural dialogue through cultural diplomacy is widely acknowledged. Exhibitions, performances and other cultural forms enable their audience to engage with others' heritage and living culture.³⁵ Historically, national cultural institutions, such as museums, have played a key role as cultural policy actors in nation states.³⁶ These institutions attempt to build "cultural bridges across borders" by developing cultural tourism or by facilitating diplomatic dialogue with foreign nations.³⁷ Grincheva states that museums currently serve as "central nodes in social cultural networks formed by states, governments, and communities."³⁸ She proposes that contemporary museums be thought of as "vehicles for a 'trans-cultural encounter.'"³⁹ Sandell believes that in recent decades, museums have been positioned as "sites in which social understandings of cultural difference are negotiated, constituted, and communicated"⁴⁰ and that museums have the capacity to "shape, not simply reflect, social and political relations and realities."⁴¹

In her 1990 Master's thesis, Tarasoff noted a trend towards increased international cooperation and interaction and argued that internationalism is a quality inherent to museums.⁴² In investigating the reasons why museums partake in international activity, Tarasoff found that the main justification is that museums can contribute to

³² Bound et al., *Cultural Diplomacy*, 12.

³³ Cynthia P. Schneider, "The Unrealized Potential of Cultural Diplomacy: 'Best Practices' and What Could Be, If Only..." *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 39, no. 4 (2009): 262.

³⁴ Schneider, "The Unrealized Potential of Cultural Diplomacy: 'Best Practices' and What Could Be, If Only..." 276.

³⁵ Bound et al., *Cultural Diplomacy*, 26.

³⁶ Grincheva, "Cultural Diplomacy 2.0: Challenges and Opportunities in Museum International Practices," 40.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁰ Richard Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), x.

⁴¹ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, xi.

⁴² Tamara Tarasoff, "Assessing International Museum Activity: The Example of International Travelling Exhibitions from Canadian Museums, 1978-1988" (Master's thesis, University of Toronto, 1990), 3.

international understanding and communication.⁴³ This idea is reflected in the words of Ford W. Bell, President of the American Alliance of Museums, who believes that “In a world where borders simultaneously mean nothing and everything, museums have the power to bring together communities and facilitate communication to weave together a stronger social fabric.”⁴⁴

International touring exhibitions

A number of scholars highlight the possible negative effects of touring exhibitions. Wallis acknowledges that international touring exhibitions act as “national promotional vehicles” and that blockbuster shows have consequences including the promotion of tourism, the populist expansion of the role of the museum, and the development of international business and political connections.⁴⁵ However, he is highly critical of international exhibitions. Wallis concedes that they “presumably” foster international understanding by providing “encapsulated, easily digestible vignettes of a foreign nation’s culture”,⁴⁶ yet he is concerned that the exhibitions scarcely broach the “complicated issues raised by any contemporary, multicultural society or touch on the contradictions or conflicts in the histories of the countries they represent.”⁴⁷ Wallis states that

though scrupulously researched and painstakingly displayed, nationalist exhibitions are, in the end, a blatant, self-admitted form of propaganda. Yet museums, strapped for cash now more than ever, are reluctant to resist the allure of these well-endowed crowd-pleasers, even when they verge on exploitation of the museum’s intellectual resources and professional integrity. Today, nations enfranchise museums, just as they do department stores... rather than expanding our understanding, these shows narrow our view of a country to a benign, if exotic, fairy tale.⁴⁸

Grincheva notes that there is always a danger of misinterpretation of cultural content, which can distort meanings and alter facts, risking the creation of cross-cultural

⁴³ Tarasoff, “Assessing International Museum Activity: The Example of International Travelling Exhibitions from Canadian Museums, 1978-1988,” 23.

⁴⁴ Ford W. Bell, “Preface,” in *Museums in a Global Context: National Identity, International Understanding* ed. Jennifer W. Dickey, Samir El Azhar and Catherine M. Lewis (Washington: The AAM Press, 2013), 8.

⁴⁵ Brian Wallis, “Selling Nations: International Exhibition and Cultural Diplomacy,” in *Museum Culture*, ed. Donald Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 267.

⁴⁶ Wallis, “Selling Nations: International Exhibition and Cultural Diplomacy,” 278.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

misunderstandings that break trust and raise conflict.⁴⁹ Representing the “other” can be highly political and Karp states that “no genre of museum is able to escape the problems of representation inherent in exhibiting other cultures.”⁵⁰ Karp believes that cross-cultural exhibitions require the visitor to reorganise their knowledge because they present stark contrasts between what the visitor knows and what they need to know.⁵¹ Karp discusses notions of “self” and “other” produced by exhibitions. In his view,

Exhibitions represent identity, either directly, through assertion, or indirectly, by implication. When cultural ‘others’ are implicated, exhibitions tell us who we are and, perhaps most significant, who we are not. Exhibitions are privileged arenas for presenting images of self and ‘other.’⁵²

Despite the fact that museums have been interacting internationally since the institution was created, little is known of the effects or potential of this activity.⁵³ International museum partnerships tend to be poorly documented.⁵⁴ As one of the few pieces of research on the issue, Tarasoff’s thesis demonstrates that scholars tend to avoid the international nature of museums, and by failing to give it a critical appraisal, they offer museums little guidance for international activities.⁵⁵ Tarasoff believes that addressing the “whys” as well as the “whats” is crucial, as “without awareness of its philosophical underpinnings and a sense of its potential, there exists a danger that museums will participate in international activity haphazardly, without guidance, and without basis for improvement.”⁵⁶ When her thesis was published, the idea that museums contribute to international understanding had not been interrogated, so it was not clear what visitors learn from exhibitions about a foreign culture.⁵⁷ Over two

⁴⁹ Grincheva, “Cultural Diplomacy 2.0: Challenges and Opportunities in Museum International Practices,” 41.

⁵⁰ Ivan Karp, “Cultures in Museums Perspectives,” in *Exhibiting Cultures*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 378.

⁵¹ Karp, “Culture and Representation,” 22.

⁵² Karp, “Culture and Representation,” 15.

⁵³ Tarasoff, “Assessing International Museum Activity: The Example of International Travelling Exhibitions from Canadian Museums, 1978-1988,” 82.

⁵⁴ Jennifer W. Dickey, Samir El Azhar and Catherine M. Lewis, “Museums in a Global Context,” in *Museums in a Global Context: National Identity, International Understanding* ed. Jennifer W. Dickey, Samir El Azhar and Catherine M. Lewis (Washington: The AAM Press, 2013), 13.

⁵⁵ Tarasoff, “Assessing International Museum Activity: The Example of International Travelling Exhibitions from Canadian Museums, 1978-1988,” 3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

decades later, little has changed, and there remains a lack of research which examines the impact of touring exhibitions.⁵⁸

The existing visitor studies literature about travelling exhibitions is scant and tends to be purely descriptive and lacking in theory and critique.⁵⁹ The few published studies⁶⁰ reveal little about cultural diplomacy or the impact of touring exhibitions on the visitor. Sandell argues that a “neglect of audiences and processes of reception” has resulted in a lack of empirical evidence and theoretical interrogation with which to “inform and substantiate the claims that museums are making, and those being made on their behalf.”⁶¹ This is certainly the case for research into international touring exhibitions. Tarasoff’s work is valuable in that it highlights the paucity of research into international touring exhibitions, and suggests a need for visitor research that addresses this gap in the literature.

Visitor research

Davidson observes that “the field of museum visitor studies, at the heart of which is the acknowledgement that museums should be responsive to the needs and interests of visitors, has only gradually gained recognition as an important facet of museum practice.”⁶² Little visitor research was conducted in museums before the mid-twentieth century.⁶³ During the 1960s, visitor surveys and exhibition evaluation became more common in the UK and US. At this time, methods were largely quantitative and tended to involve “measuring, counting and mapping.”⁶⁴ By the 1980s, visitors were thought of as active interpreters with their own agendas, “less malleable and less predictable than was at first thought.”⁶⁵ Davidson notes that the establishment of visitor studies as a distinct field of museum practice in the 1980s and

⁵⁸ Lee Davidson, “Visitor Studies: Towards a Culture of Reflective Practice and Critical Museology for the Visitor-Centered Museum,” in *Museum Practice: The Contemporary Museum at Work*, ed. Conal McCarthy (Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley, forthcoming, 2015).

⁵⁹ Tarasoff, “Assessing International Museum Activity: The Example of International Travelling Exhibitions from Canadian Museums, 1978-1988,” 2.

⁶⁰ Examples include Pedro Casaleiro, “Evaluating the Moving Dinosaurs: Surveys of the Blockbuster Exhibition in Four European Capital Cities,” *Visitor Studies* 9, no. 1 (1996) and Rosalyn Rubenstein, Andrea Paradis and Leslie Munro, “A Comparative Study of a Traveling Exhibition at Four Public Settings in Canada,” *Environment and Behaviour* 25 (1993).

⁶¹ Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 4.

⁶² Davidson, “Visitor Studies: Towards a Culture of Reflective Practice and Critical Museology for the Visitor-Centered Museum.”

⁶³ George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 43.

⁶⁴ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, “Studying Visitors,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 371.

⁶⁵ Hooper-Greenhill, “Studying Visitors,” 367.

1990s coincided with the “new museology.”⁶⁶ New methods were needed to reflect the change in the way that visitors were being perceived. By 2006, rather than being thought of as “an undifferentiated mass public”, visitors were accepted as “active interpreters and performers of meaning-making practices within complex cultural sites.”⁶⁷ In line with this shift, there has been a turn to in-depth, qualitative research methods aimed at understanding the construction of meaning.

Over the past few decades, a number of scholars have called for methods that provide in-depth insight into the visitor experience. In 1996, Masberg and Silverman noted a “surprising lack of understanding of visitors’ perspective on the experience of visiting a heritage site” which they attributed to the use of quantitative approaches.⁶⁸ They identified a phenomenological approach as a “critical direction for the future of both heritage tourism research and practice” believing such approaches “may well hold the key to truly illuminating the multidimensional nature of visitor experiences at heritage sites.”⁶⁹ Writing nearly two decades later, Schorch states that “we are still struggling to fully develop a form of visitor studies that understands how visitors make meaning.”⁷⁰ In his view, “if the goal is an understanding of the meaning and purpose of the new museology, then qualitative insights are of fundamental significance.”⁷¹ Schorch highlights a shortcoming in museum visitor studies in the form of “a lack of in-depth and long-term visitor insights”⁷² and notes that Hooper-Greenhill’s 2006 “suggestion to reframe the museum-visitor relationship through the concept of meaning-making has been taken up very slowly.”⁷³

The use of narrative as a visitor research method has been one response to calls for studies that provide qualitative insights. In 2010 Spector-Mersel identified a “narrative turn” in the human sciences, which has taken place over the last three

⁶⁶ Davidson, “Visitor Studies: Towards a Culture of Reflective Practice and Critical Museology for the Visitor-Centered Museum.”

⁶⁷ Hooper-Greenhill, “Studying Visitors,” 362.

⁶⁸ Barbara A. Masberg and Lois H. Silverman, “Visitor Experiences at Heritage Sites: A Phenomenological Approach,” *Journal of Travel Research* 34, no. 4 (1996): 20.

⁶⁹ Masberg and Silverman, “Visitor Experiences at Heritage Sites: A Phenomenological Approach,” 25.

⁷⁰ Philipp Schorch, “Museum Encounters and Narrative Engagements,” in *Museum Theory: An Expanded Field*, ed. A. Witcomb and K. Message (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2015).

⁷¹ Philipp Schorch, “Te Papa: A Forum for the World? A Narrative Exploration of a Global Public Sphere” (PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2010), 9.

⁷² Schorch, “Te Papa: A Forum for the World? A Narrative Exploration of a Global Public Sphere,” 2.

⁷³ Schorch, “Museum Encounters and Narrative Engagements.”

decades, expropriated from the humanities.⁷⁴ Schorch draws attention to a number of recent narrative-based visitor studies including those by Paris and Mercer in 2002, Everett and Barrett in 2009, Lelliott and Pendlebury in 2009.⁷⁵ Narrative is a key feature of Schorch's own work, and he describes it as "a particular and promising theoretical and methodological instrument for qualitative investigations that seek to understand visitor experiences."⁷⁶ Schorch argues that "any experience will somehow be entangled with narratives in its quest for meaning. Any analysis aimed at the complexity of an experience, then, is bound to somehow follow a narrative approach."⁷⁷

Everett and Barrett also advocate the use of narrative-based methods, arguing that "Narrative methodology is one means by which researchers may access rich accounts of the multi-faceted nature of audience relationships with museums."⁷⁸ The pair used a narrative research design to "delve deeply into the complexities surrounding the phenomenon of visitor/museum relationships, and to gain novel insights, from the visitor's perspective, about the role museum visiting plays in individual lives."⁷⁹ Paris and Mercer's narrative study into personal identity and museum experiences focussed on what they called "transactions" between people and objects. In their view, "transactions with objects might evoke tangential, unintended, or novel responses and might change the knowledge, beliefs, or attitudes of the visitor."⁸⁰ They argue that "Museum visitors discover bits and pieces of their own lives in the objects they encounter as they browse, cruise, and examine museum spaces. The information becomes meaningful through reference to representations of who they are and who they want to become."⁸¹

⁷⁴ Gabriela Spector-Mersel, "Narrative Research: Time for a Paradigm," *Narrative Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (2010): 204.

⁷⁵ Schorch, "Museum Encounters and Narrative Engagements."

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Michele Everett and Margaret Barrett, "Investigating Sustained Visitor/Museum Relationship: Employing Narrative Research in the Field of Museum Visitor Studies," *Visitor Studies* 12, no. 1 (2009): 2.

⁷⁹ Everett and Barrett, "Investigating Sustained Visitor/Museum Relationship: Employing Narrative Research in the Field of Museum Visitor Studies," 5.

⁸⁰ Scott G. Paris and Melissa J. Mercer, "Finding Self in Objects: Identity Exploration in Museums," in *Learning Conversations in Museums*, ed. Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley and Karen Knutson (New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 401.

⁸¹ Paris and Mercer, "Finding Self in Objects: Identity Exploration in Museums," 407.

Another significant focus in recent visitor research is long-term investigations into the visitor experience. Anderson, Storksdieck and Spock state that “The nature and quality of learning and enjoyment derived from a museum visit may shift significantly over time and the true impact from the museum visit may not actually occur during the visit, but afterwards, through subsequent experiences.”⁸² An understanding of the long-term impact of museums provides valuable information about how to improve museum experiences for visitors.⁸³ Anderson and Shimizu conducted a long-term study of Expo 70 in Osaka, Japan, over thirty years after the Expo was held. Their findings included that visitors’ socio-cultural identities at the time of the experience critically shaped their memories of the experience.⁸⁴ They argue that visitor experience “does not merely last the length of a visit, but rather the experience lives on years after the visit in visitors’ memories, conversations, and other life experiences.”⁸⁵ The long-term impact of museum experiences is underresearched and there remains the opportunity for long-term studies to make a significant impact on the understanding of visitor experience.⁸⁶

Visitor meaning-making

Having introduced some of the key developments within the field of visitor research, including the way it has evolved in terms of methodology, the review now turns to visitor meaning-making. A facet of visitor research, meaning-making is included here in a separate section because it is the central focus of this study. This section covers some of the main themes within the literature on meaning-making, including identity, transformative experiences, perceptions of “self” and “other” and emotions. It is now widely acknowledged that rather than a basic transmission model, communication within an exhibition can be thought of as “an on-going process of exchange and

⁸² David Anderson, Martin Storksdieck and Michael Spock, “Understanding the Long-Term Impacts of Museum Experiences,” in *In Principle, In Practice: Museums as Learning Institutions*, ed. John H. Falk, Lynn D. Dierking and Susan Foutz (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2007), 197.

⁸³ Anderson, Storksdieck and Spock, “Understanding the Long-Term Impacts of Museum Experiences,” 197.

⁸⁴ David Anderson and Hiroyuki Shimizu, “Recollections of Expo 70: Visitors’ Experiences and the Retention of Vivid Long-Term Memories,” *Curator* 50, no. 4 (2007): 440.

⁸⁵ Anderson and Shimizu, “Recollections of Expo 70: Visitors’ Experiences and the Retention of Vivid Long-Term Memories,” 451.

⁸⁶ Anderson, Storksdieck and Spock, “Understanding the Long-Term Impacts of Museum Experiences,” 212.

dialogue dependent on many factors.”⁸⁷ In 1995, Lois Silverman became one of the first scholars to call for a better understanding of visitor meaning-making.⁸⁸ Meaning-making “illuminates the visitor’s active role in creating meaning of a museum experience through the context he/she brings, influenced by the factors of self-identity, companions and leisure motivations.”⁸⁹ Silverman states that

Visitors ‘make meaning’ through a constant process of remembering and connecting... both perception and learning hinge upon the accommodation of new information into existing mental structures and frameworks. In museums, people attempt to place what they encounter—be it text, object, fact, perspective—within the context of their experience.⁹⁰

Highlighting the importance of identity to the meaning-making process, Silverman states that “one’s sense of self and the desire to affirm and express it contribute greatly to the aspects of meaning that are activated in response to objects and exhibits.”⁹¹ It is widely agreed upon among museum studies scholars that the meaning visitors attribute to objects, exhibitions or sites is highly influenced by aspects of their identity, which may include their ethnicity, gender, educational background, social status and prior knowledge.⁹² Falk believes that identity “runs through all facets of the museum visitor experience”⁹³ and with Heimlich and Bronnenkant he found that aspects of visitors’ identities not only shaped their reasons for visiting but also helped visitors organise their experience and relate it to themselves.⁹⁴ According to Kratz, “As visitors encounter an exhibition, they form interpretations through an interplay between what the exhibition brings to them and what they bring to the exhibition.”⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Rhianon Mason, “Museums, Galleries and Heritage: Sites of Meaning-Making and Communication,” in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Gerard Corsane (London: Routledge, 2005), 208.

⁸⁸ Lois H. Silverman, “Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 38, no. 3, (1995).

⁸⁹ Silverman, “Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age,” 161.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Mason, “Museums, Galleries and Heritage: Sites of Meaning-Making and Communication,” 205; Hooper-Greenhill, “Studying Visitors,” 367.

⁹³ John H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2009), 9.

⁹⁴ John H. Falk, Joseph Heimlich and Kerry Bronnenkant, “Using Identity-Related Visit Motivations as a Tool for Understanding Adult Zoo and Aquarium Visitors’ Meaning-Making,” *Curator* 51, no. 1 (2008): 72.

⁹⁵ Corinne A. Kratz, *The Ones That Are Wanted: Communication and the Politics of Representation in a Photographic Exhibition* (California: University of California Press, 2002), 162.

In 1992, John Falk and Lynn Dierking devised the “Interactive Experience Model” as a framework for understanding the museum experience.⁹⁶ Davidson notes that their book *The Museum Experience* “marked a milestone for visitor studies literature” and provided the first coherent framework within which to understand the visitor experience.⁹⁷ Falk and Dierking proposed that the visitor’s context should be divided into the personal, the sociocultural and the physical, all of which overlap and change over time.⁹⁸ Falk, Heimlich and Bronnenkant believe that

most museum visitors, as active meaning seekers, engage in a degree of self-reflection and self-interpretation about their visit experience. Most of this self-interpretation revolves around an effort to give coherence and meaning to the experience, including their relationship to the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the physical environment and the ‘who’ and ‘why’ of the social environment.⁹⁹

A number of scholars discuss the idea that the museum visit can “transform” the visitor. Falk believes that museum visitors use their visit experience to enhance and change their sense of identity.¹⁰⁰ This echoes Hooper-Greenhill’s idea that “One of the most significant characteristics of learning in museums is its power to shape identities.”¹⁰¹ Hooper-Greenhill again highlights the museum’s ability to transform the visitor when she states that “the research suggests that museums are places where self-concepts can be changed, where self-esteem can be increased, and where, potentially, a stronger sense of self can be engendered.”¹⁰² Laurajane Smith explores the idea of the “transformative moment”, which she says is characterised by “deep engagement, not simply with the emotional or affective responses the museum, and the act of visiting itself, can engender” and is marked by a level of change in a visitor’s views or understanding.¹⁰³ She notes that empathy is often a key emotional

⁹⁶ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, DC: Whalesback Books, 1992).

⁹⁷ Davidson, “Visitor Studies: Towards a Culture of Reflective Practice and Critical Museology for the Visitor-Centered Museum.”

⁹⁸ Falk and Dierking, *The Museum Experience*; John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2012).

⁹⁹ Falk, Heimlich and Bronnenkant, “Using Identity-Related Visit Motivations as a Tool for Understanding Adult Zoo and Aquarium Visitors’ Meaning-Making,” 56.

¹⁰⁰ Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*, 36.

¹⁰¹ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance* (Oxon and New York: Taylor and Francis, 2007), 178.

¹⁰² Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance*, 188.

¹⁰³ Laurajane Smith, “Changing Views? Emotional Intelligence, Registers of Engagement and the Museum Visit,” in *Museums as Sites of Historical Consciousness: Perspectives on Museum Theory and Practice in Canada*, ed. V. Gosselin and P. Livingstone (Vancouver: UBC Press, forthcoming).

response for triggering a transformative experience.¹⁰⁴ Smith argues that “museum visiting is an embodied performance of heritage making in which ideas, meaning, identity and cultural values are negotiated.”¹⁰⁵

In her chapter “The Cultural ‘Work’ of Tourism”, Smith demonstrates that the “work” that visitors to heritage sites do includes actively working out, remembering and negotiating cultural meanings, as well as affirming and creating definitions of “self” and “other.”¹⁰⁶ She provides a useful framework for thinking about meaning-making in a touring exhibition. Smith describes the idea of the “cultural moment” created by “the interplay of the performances of heritage, tourism and remembering.”¹⁰⁷ She conducted visitor research into the cultural moments performed at two Australian heritage sites—the Old Melbourne Gaol and the Stockman’s Hall of Fame and Outback Heritage Centre. The results demonstrated that cultural moments vary, as do levels of engagement, and are influenced by the physical place being visited, as well as certain discourses and narratives, and the needs, concerns and ideological dispositions of the visitors.

Visitors’ notions of “self” and “other” have also been explored by Philipp Schorch. His work follows Smith’s call for ethnographic research that “uncovers the moments of heritage”; viewing heritage as an experience, an act of meaning-making, and a process of engagement.¹⁰⁸ In Schorch’s view, heritage can enable a transformation of the Self through engagement with the Other.¹⁰⁹ His recent narrative-based study into the *Identity: yours, mine, ours* exhibition at Melbourne’s Immigration Museum aimed to investigate the role of the exhibition in countering racism and increasing acceptance of differences among Australian high school students. One of Schorch’s key findings was that the exhibition “moves beyond the orchestration of an abstract tolerance by unsettling ‘the Self’ and destabilising stereotyped interpretations of ‘the Other’”.¹¹⁰ Schorch argues that “The clashing of cultures within an exhibition space

¹⁰⁴ Smith, “Changing Views? Emotional Intelligence, Registers of Engagement and the Museum Visit.”

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Laura Jane Smith, “The Cultural ‘Work’ of Tourism,” in *The Cultural Moment in Tourism*, ed. Laura Jane Smith, Emma Waterton and Steve Watson (New York: Routledge, 2012), 230.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, “The Cultural ‘Work’ of Tourism,” 215.

¹⁰⁸ Philipp Schorch, “Cultural Feelings and the Making of Meaning,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2012): 2.

¹⁰⁹ Schorch, “Cultural Feelings and the Making of Meaning,” 1-2.

¹¹⁰ Philipp Schorch, “Experiencing Differences and Negotiating Prejudices at the Immigration Museum Melbourne,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2014): 2.

turns the reframing of understandings into a dialogical necessity.”¹¹¹ Clearly, visitor perceptions of “self” and “other” are a current focus within visitor research and are worth examining within the context of an international touring exhibition.

Feelings, also discussed as emotion or affect,¹¹² are yet another key theme in recently published visitor studies literature. In 2009 Smith and Waterton noted a lack of recognition of affect and emotion as essential elements of heritage making.¹¹³ Much research has been done on the subject since then. Schorch argues that engagement with a visitor space starts on a “sensory, emotive and embodied level.”¹¹⁴ In his view, heritage is an experienced process in which emotions and feelings are enmeshed with our thoughts and produce “cultural feelings”—certain meanings that resist any attempt at formal verbalisation.¹¹⁵ Smith and Campbell write that “Each affective response occurs through a complex interaction of place/exhibition, personal agency and social and cultural context.”¹¹⁶ They found that emotions “underpinned and validated the way visitors engaged or disengaged with the information contained in exhibitions and heritage sites, and were used to affirm, rethink, negotiate or ignore the histories that were on display.”¹¹⁷ Empathy is a prominent feature in recent literature and has been described as a “frequent and important emotion for many visitors.”¹¹⁸

Summary

Uncertainty surrounding the effects of international touring exhibitions on their audiences stems from a lack of visitor research on the subject. As well as identifying the gap in the literature which this study aims to address, this review outlined how the field of visitor studies has evolved, reflecting the changing ways that visitors have been perceived by scholars and museum professionals in recent decades. Of particular importance is the turn to qualitative methods aimed at understanding visitor meaning-making. This study draws on recently published meaning-making literature, and in

¹¹¹ Philipp Schorch, “Contact Zones, Third Spaces, and the Act of Interpretation,” *Museum and Society* 11, no.1 (2013): 73.

¹¹² It should be noted that these three terms are distinguished in the theoretical literature.

¹¹³ Smith and Campbell, “The Elephant in the Room: Heritage, Affect and Emotion.”

¹¹⁴ Schorch, “Cultural Feelings and the Making of Meaning,” 1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹¹⁶ Laura Jane Smith and Gary Campbell, “The Elephant in the Room: Heritage, Affect and Emotion,” in *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, ed. W. Logan, M. Nic Craith, U. Kockel (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming, 2015).

¹¹⁷ Smith and Campbell, “The Elephant in the Room: Heritage, Affect and Emotion.”

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

particular studies into identity, emotions, and ideas of “self” and “other”. This review demonstrates that there is much scope to draw on the existing literature and provide new information about cultural diplomacy through investigating visitor meaning-making within the context of an international touring exhibition.

This chapter has “set the scene” for this dissertation. It introduced the exhibition at the centre of the study, reviewed the relevant literature and discussed the reception of previous Aztec exhibitions. The next chapter, Chapter Two, explains the methods used to undertake the research and introduces the participants who informed the study. The third and fourth chapters present the findings of the research, discussing them in relation to the research aims. The final chapter, Chapter Five, contains the conclusions reached and recommendations for further study

Chapter Two: Research Design



Figure 2.1 A chacmool (sacrificial stone) in the first section of the exhibition. Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

Introduction

Having introduced the study, including its aims, the literature that informs it and the exhibition under investigation, this chapter presents the research design. It outlines the research questions and the qualitative research methodology used to investigate them. The research design is influenced by calls for narrative-based methods and long-term visitor insights, which were discussed in the literature review. In-depth, narrative-based interviews were chosen as the best method for gaining an insight into the visitor experience. Twenty-three visitors to the exhibition made up the research sample for this study, and they are introduced in this chapter. Follow-up interviews were conducted with eleven of the participants in order to gauge lasting impressions of the exhibition. The chapter also covers ethical implications, sampling methods, methods of analysis and the limitations of the study.

This study aims to contribute to emerging methodological trends in visitor research; namely narrative-based and long-term studies, both of which are acknowledged in the literature as important directions for gaining a more complete understanding of the

visitor experience. The study follows calls for research that illuminates visitor meaning-making through interpretive philosophies. As Hooper-Greenhill points out,

In order to understand the sense that visitors make in museums, it is not enough to observe what people do, and it is not enough to ask demographic questions. While some information will be gained from these approaches, a more in-depth approach is necessary to probe interpretive strategies and repertoires. This demands a turn to interpretive philosophies and qualitative research methods.¹¹⁹

The research questions below reflect the aim of investigating a gap in the literature by shedding light on visitor meaning-making within an international touring exhibition. The questions are influenced by existing literature with its emphasis on the agency of the visitor and the way aspects of identity influence meaning-making. The questions also allow for an investigation into ideas about “self” and “other” produced through experiencing the exhibition, as well as the role of emotions in the construction of meaning. The questions are:

What are visitors’ impressions of Aztec culture, and of Mexico more generally, produced through their experiences of *Aztecs*?

In what ways do visitors to the *Aztecs* exhibition “make meaning” about Aztec culture?

Methodology

The above questions call for an in-depth examination of the way visitors experienced and interpreted the *Aztecs: Conquest and glory* exhibition. The methodology for this study is informed by phenomenology and hermeneutics. As Kvale and Brinkmann note, phenomenology is about how humans *experience* life world phenomena, whereas hermeneutics focusses on the *interpretation* of meaning.¹²⁰ This study is very much focussed on both experience and interpretation. Hermeneutics can be defined as the study of the interpretation of texts.¹²¹ In this study, the “texts” take the form of interview transcripts and the narratives within them, and the aim is to make valid

¹¹⁹ Hooper-Greenhill, “Studying Visitors,” 373.

¹²⁰ Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 14.

¹²¹ Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 50.

interpretations of their meanings. “Double hermeneutics”¹²² is employed in this study because it involves participants’ interpretations (captured in the texts) followed by my own interpretation of these texts. Phenomenology is primarily concerned with human experience, and focusses on the ways in which people interpret events and make sense of their personal experiences.¹²³ It is therefore appropriate for this research into visitor meaning-making.

Methods

This study draws on data from a two-stage interview process.

- Narrative-based in-depth interviews with visitors

Because this dissertation explores visitors’ thoughts, feelings and opinions, the most appropriate method was in-depth qualitative interviews. Interviews are the most common method within qualitative research.¹²⁴ In Patton’s view, the purpose of interviewing is to “allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective.”¹²⁵ The aim was to allow visitors to “speak for themselves” in order to gain the most accurate understanding of their experience and behaviour. Administering the same questions through a written survey was considered as a possible method, however it was decided that speaking to participants face-to-face would produce more thoughtful, in-depth answers, which would be key to answering the research questions.

The interviews were semi-structured and loosely based on Wengraf’s Biographical-Narrative-Interpretive Method (BNIM).¹²⁶ According to Wengraf, “*precisely by what it assumes and therefore does not focus upon*, narrative conveys tacit and unconscious assumptions and norms of the individual or of a cultural group. At least in some respects, they are less subject to the individual’s conscious control.”¹²⁷ After first attempting to “break the ice” by asking the interviewee to tell me about themselves, I

¹²² Lace Marie Brogden, “Double Hermeneutic,” in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos and Eiden Wiebe (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), 323.

¹²³ Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, 4th ed. (Maidenhead, England: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press, 2010), 94.

¹²⁴ Nigel King and Christine Horrocks, *Interviews in Qualitative Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 1.

¹²⁵ M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1990), 278.

¹²⁶ Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods* (London: Sage Publications, 2001).

¹²⁷ Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*, 115.

used what Wengraf calls a “SQUIN” (single question aimed at inducing narrative) which was: *Now I’d like to hear all about your visit to the exhibition. I was hoping that you could talk me through your visit. Please tell me everything you remember, in as much detail as you can. You can begin wherever you like, and I’ll just listen and I won’t interrupt. I’m interested in your perspective and story, and will take some notes for after you have finished telling me about your experience of the visit.*

According to Wengraf’s method, the SQUIN is followed by two subsessions, the third of which should be conducted at a later date to allow for analysis of the first two subsessions. For practical reasons, I conducted interviews in one session. Once the participant had completed their narrative, they were asked several open-ended follow-up questions. Although I had an interview guide with set questions (see Appendix A), the order differed and some questions were added or left out, depending on the participant’s responses. Immediately following each interview, I did a self-debrief, noting down my initial thoughts and impressions in a research journal. These comments aided in analysis.

Interviews took place at a time and place convenient to each participant. The interviews were not conducted as exit interviews (the most common form of interview in the museum context) as they would have provided only immediate impressions. Instead, they were deliberately conducted at a later date in order to give participants time to reflect on their visit before the interview. Some interviews were done in person, and others over the telephone or on Skype. Conducting the interviews on the phone or on Skype did not adversely affect the richness of the data collected. Like Deakin and Wakefield, who conducted Skype interviews, I found I was still able to build rapport despite a lack of face-to-face contact, and the quality of the conversations was not affected.¹²⁸ Holt believes that there is no need to consider the use of telephones for narrative interviews as a “second-best” option¹²⁹ and this proved to be the case for this study. In total, twenty-three interviews were conducted between 20 November 2013 and 19 February 2014. The interviews lasted between 16 and 40 minutes, with an average length of 27 minutes and 20 seconds. Due to the limited time available to me, I needed to be realistic about the amount of data I was able to

¹²⁸ Hannah Deakin and Kelly Wakefield, “Skype Interviewing: Reflections of Two PhD Researchers,” *Qualitative Research* 14, no. 5 (2014): 610.

¹²⁹ Amanda Holt, “Using the Telephone for Narrative Interviewing: A Research Note,” *Qualitative Research* 10, no. 1 (2010): 120.

collect and interpret. After conducting twenty-three interviews, I felt confident that I had ample data with which to answer the research questions.

Participants were selected using non-probability sampling. The sample was exploratory rather than representative, as it was unrealistic to attempt to match the proportions of the overall research population (all 39,861 visitors to *Aztecs* at Te Papa),¹³⁰ of which I had little information when I began recruiting interviewees. According to Denscombe, “An exploratory sample is used as a way of probing relatively unexplored topics and as a route to the discovery of new ideas or theories. The point of the sample is to provide the researcher with a means for generating insights and information.”¹³¹ Although an accurate cross-section of the population was unnecessary for this study, I aimed to interview visitors from a range of backgrounds in order to gather differing perspectives.

Eight of the twenty-three participants were self-selected through the exit survey administered by Te Papa’s Visitor and Market Research (VMR) team. A question was added to the end of the VMR survey, asking if the participant would like to take part in further research, conducted by Victoria University. A small proportion (approximately 10%) of people surveyed agreed, and were contacted by myself via email or telephone with further information about the research project and a request to interview. Of these people, only a small proportion replied and became one of the participants for this study. Because this method was slow, and because the VMR survey was discontinued in December 2013 due to resource constraints, a number of participants were recruited via word of mouth. Acquaintances were often able to suggest someone they knew who had visited the exhibition, and these people were approached if it was decided that they would aid in creating a diverse sample. The “snowball” method was used on two occasions when the interviewee recommended someone else to interview. One participant, Julie, was approached by myself at the exit of the exhibition, and agreed to meet me the following day to be interviewed. Julie had little time to reflect on her visit, which meant that the interview was less comprehensive than the others. The average number of days between visit and interview was twenty-two days. All but two of the participants were interviewed within one month of their visit. The longest time between visit and interview was ten

¹³⁰ Owen, “Aztecs: Conquest and Glory VMR Wrap Report.”

¹³¹ Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, 24.

weeks. This interviewee, Geoff, was selected via the snowball method. He was able to provide surprisingly detailed answers, reinforcing the idea that conducting follow-up interviews would be a useful addition to the research methods.

- Follow-up interviews

The consent form that participants filled out for the initial interview asked whether they would be prepared to take part in a second, follow-up interview, several months later. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to access lasting impressions of the exhibition and determine whether subsequent experiences had changed participants' interpretation of the exhibition. As Karp and Kratz point out, "If an exhibition affects a visitor, it may take time and other experiences to activate that effect and bring it to some form of consciousness, such as through a conversation."¹³² Although every participant agreed to take part in a second interview, I did not conduct follow-up interviews with all twenty-three. Follow-up interviews were conducted with eleven of the original participants, as the amount of data gathered during the initial interviews meant that doing any more than eleven would have provided too much data for me to analyse and present in a 20,000 word dissertation. The follow-up participants were selected through purposive sampling which allowed me to get "the best information" by selecting people "most likely to have the experience or expertise to provide quality information and valuable insights on the research topic."¹³³ Through the use of purposive sampling, I was able to re-interview those participants who shared ideas most relevant to answering the research questions, and gauge how these key ideas changed during the time between interviews. The follow-ups took place six to ten months after the initial interviews. Like the initial interviews, the follow-ups were conducted face-to-face, on the phone or via Skype. They were significantly shorter than the first interviews, lasting for just under fourteen minutes on average.

Follow-up interviews followed the BNIM method more closely. They began with this SQUIN: *The aim of this interview is to find out about your lasting impressions of the Aztecs exhibition. It is not a memory test, but to begin with, it would be great if you could please tell me about your visit to the exhibition, in as much detail as you can. Start wherever you like, I'll just listen and I won't interrupt.* The SQUIN was

¹³² Ivan Karp with Corrine A. Kratz, "Collecting, Exhibiting, and Interpreting: Museums as Mediators and Midwives of Meaning", *Museum Anthropology* 37, no. 1 (2014): 62.

¹³³ Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, 35.

followed by “story-eliciting” questions based on things mentioned by the interviewee during their narrative, using their words and the order they mentioned things in. This step was sometimes left out if interviewees spoke in sufficient depth in response to the SQUIN. This subsession was followed by individualised questions formulated before the interview, which were not necessarily narrative-inducing. These questions were mostly based on things the participant said in their first interview but also included asking participants to recount any experiences that had reminded them of the exhibition since their first interview. As in the initial interviews, this third subsession was not done in a separate interview as Wengraf recommends. As Wengraf himself points out, “all design strategy is a compromise, and any implementation is a further compromise.”¹³⁴ He writes that the research design for each particular study determines what is an acceptable compromise in terms of research design.

Ethics

A number of ethical considerations were taken into account before the study commenced. Crucial to research ethics is the idea that it is unjustifiable to impose burdens on subjects for the sake of gains to others.¹³⁵ The researcher must take responsibility to ensure that no harm will come to respondents during the research process.¹³⁶ Ethical approval was sought from the Victoria University of Wellington Ethics Committee and I abided by their code of ethics. Each interviewee was provided with an information sheet describing how the results would be used, the use of pseudonyms in any publications or presentations, and the opportunity to withdraw from the study any time before March 2015. Participants also signed a consent form. Another vital ethical consideration is informed consent, which protects the subject’s wellbeing and respects their autonomy.¹³⁷ A respondent must not be coerced, manipulated or forced into being involved in the research. Sarantakos sums up the issue of informed consent when he states, “participation should be free, voluntary and

¹³⁴ Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*, 149.

¹³⁵ T. M. Wilkinson, “The Core Ideas of Research Ethics,” in *Research Ethics in Aotearoa New Zealand: Concepts, Practice, Critique*, ed. Martin Tolich (Auckland: Longman, 2011), 15.

¹³⁶ Sotirios Sarantakos, *Social Research*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1998), 19.

¹³⁷ Wilkinson, “The Core Ideas of Research Ethics.” 16.

fully informed.”¹³⁸ Participation in this study was voluntary, and I aimed to ensure that no one felt pressured to participate.

Research sample

The twenty-three participants in this study represented a diverse sample.

- The average age was 44 years old, with a range of 22-70 years old
- 11 out of 23 (48%) were female and 12 (52%) male
- 15 were from the greater Wellington region (65%), 7 (30%) from other parts of New Zealand and 1 was from England
- 5 out of 23 (22%) visited alone, the rest went in a group
- 7 (30%) visited with at least one child
- 16 described themselves as Pākehā or New Zealand European, 3 British, 2 Māori, 1 Colombian and 1 Asian

Participant profiles

Below are brief profiles of the twenty-three research participants. The profiles are included here in order to introduce the reader to the people who are central to this study before the findings chapters in which their thoughts are shared.

Rachel (20 November 2013)

Rachel, my first interviewee, was interviewed in person two days after her visit to the exhibition. She is a student born in the 1990s, and was visiting Wellington from Gisborne. She visited the exhibition alone.

Myles (25 November 2013 and 13 August 2014)

Myles, a postgraduate psychology student from Wellington, was born in 1990. The interview was in person, one month after his visit. He saw the exhibition with his girlfriend and her family.

Robert (3 December 2013)

A retired school teacher from Auckland, Robert was interviewed eight days after his visit. He was born in the 1940s and visited with his partner. He is a Friend of Te Papa

¹³⁸ Sarantakos, *Social Research*, 20.

and participated in a focus group for the formative evaluation of *Aztecs*. I interviewed him in person.

Gordon (4 December 2013 and 29 August 2014)

Gordon was born in the UK in the 1960s, and now lives in Wellington and works for the police. He visited the exhibition with his eleven-year-old son. I interviewed him in person, three weeks after his visit.

Harry (9 December 2013 and 5 September 2014)

Harry visited *Aztecs* on a date with his girlfriend Gemma. I interviewed them both at their home in Wellington, one month after their visit. Harry is a sociology student in his late twenties.

Gemma (9 December 2013 and 25 August 2014)

Gemma visited the exhibition with her boyfriend Harry (see above). She is an artist, and trained in jewellery design. Gemma was born in the UK in the late eighties, and moved to New Zealand as a child.

Maria (11 December 2013)

Maria was interviewed in person six weeks after her visit. She is aged in her thirties and has returned to study after working in libraries and museums. She lives in Wellington and her partner was involved in the development of the exhibition.

Jill (12 December 2013)

Jill is an artist from Nelson, born in the 1940s. I interviewed her via Skype, two weeks after her visit to *Aztecs*. She visited the exhibition with a friend.

Isaac (12 December 2013 and 1 September 2014)

Isaac, a mathematics student, visited the exhibition with his girlfriend. Born in 1992, he was the youngest participant. He lives in Wellington and I interviewed him in person one month after his visit.

Lorraine (16 December 2013)

I interviewed Lorraine at her home in Lower Hutt, one month after her visit. Aged in her sixties, she is an antique dealer and visited the exhibition alone.

Basil (19 December 2013 and 21 August 2014)

Basil is a farmer in his seventies. He lives in Otago and I interviewed him over the phone two weeks after his visit. It was his first visit to Te Papa, and he saw *Aztecs* alone.

Grace (23 December 2013)

Grace is an artist in her sixties, who visited the exhibition alone during a trip to Wellington. She lives in Auckland. We spoke on the phone, three weeks after her visit.

Dylan (15 January 2014)

Dylan is a Master of Business student, born in the 1970s. He is from Auckland, and visited the exhibition alone. The interview was done over the phone, three weeks after his visit.

Yvonne (16 January 2014)

Yvonne visited the exhibition with her husband and two school-aged sons during a family holiday in Wellington. She is an academic with a background in biology. She lives in Dunedin and is in her fifties. I interviewed her on Skype, four weeks after her visit.

Marcus (22 January 2014 and 19 August 2014)

Marcus is in his late twenties and works for the Ministry for Culture and Heritage in Wellington. I interviewed him in person, ten days after his visit. He visited *Aztecs* with a flatmate and a friend.

Sally (23 January 2014)

Sally was born in the 1940s and works for her local council. She was born in California and now lives in Lower Hutt. She visited the exhibition with her husband and granddaughter. I interviewed her on the phone one month after her visit.

Julie (30 January 2014)

Julie saw the exhibition during a visit to Wellington to see family. She is a retired school teacher, born in the 1940s, and lives in the UK. She took her five-year-old grandson to the exhibition. I interviewed her in person just one day after her visit.

Aaron (10 February 2014)

Aaron is a scientist, born in the 1960s. He lives in Wellington. I interviewed him via Skype, eleven days after his visit. He saw the exhibition with his partner.

Valerie (11 February 2014 and 22 August 2014)

Valerie was born in the 1950s and recently studied Art History as a mature student. She lives in Wellington and is a Friend of Te Papa, so visits the museum regularly. Valerie went to see *Aztecs* twice, once with her husband and once with her great-niece. I interviewed her in person, one month after her second visit.

Geoff (12 February 2014)

Geoff was suggested as a possible participant by Aaron. They are housemates, and like Aaron, Geoff is a scientist. It was ten weeks after his visit when I interviewed him over the phone. He visited with a friend of a friend. Geoff is aged in his forties.

Heather (18 February 2014 and 2 October 2014)

I interviewed Heather and her husband Andrés in person nine days after their visit to the exhibition. They went with their 20-month-old son and Heather's sister. Heather is a lawyer in her thirties. She lives in the Wellington region.

Andrés (18 February 2014 and 4 September 2014)

Andrés is Heather's husband. Aged in his forties, he is Colombian and works as a designer.

Dave (19 February 2014 and 22 August 2014)

Dave is a health coach in his twenties. He is from Lower Hutt and visited the exhibition with his girlfriend. I interviewed him in person ten days later.

Analysis

Each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim by myself. In a process of initial coding, I worked through each transcript, colour coding to identify broad, descriptive codes. Further coding and analysis was done using NVivo9 and NVivo10 software. Analysis was based on a grounded theory approach, meaning it was a gradual process of coding and categorising, with the aim of deriving “concepts and theories that capture the meaning contained within the data.”¹³⁹ Coding was based on the constant comparative method, meaning that the codes were frequently checked against the interview data, and were changed and refined over time. Sub-codes were created, and others were renamed to better reflect the data that they encompassed. Some pieces of data were deliberately double or triple-coded (meaning they were filed under more than one code). As I completed new interviews, new themes emerged. Coding was therefore a fluid, ongoing process of refinement. As Saldana points out, coding is an interpretive act, not a precise science.¹⁴⁰

Reflexivity

I took reflexivity into account throughout the research process. In Blaikie’s view, “reflexivity is not really a matter of choice. All social researchers should be reflexive, regardless of the stance they adopt.”¹⁴¹ The call for reflexivity is a response to the idea that the researcher’s worldview has implications for every part of the research process. Reflexivity involves recognising who you are and what you bring to the research, including any preconceptions which may affect relationships with respondents, as well as the interpretation and presentation of the data.¹⁴² Research narratives are highly influenced by the researcher’s perspective and are therefore a

¹³⁹ Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, 285.

¹⁴⁰ Johnny Saldana, *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Thousand Oaks, Calif, London: Sage, 2009), 4.

¹⁴¹ Norman Blaikie, *Designing Social Research: The Logic of Anticipation* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 54.

¹⁴² Jane Elliott, *Using Narrative in Social Research* (London: Sage, 2005), 155.

“constructed reality.”¹⁴³ I kept a journal to record my thoughts and reflections and help me determine how my personal worldview affects my research. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the journal helped with analysis because it contained my personal thoughts and opinions of the interviews, including comments on first impressions and rapport. As Wengraf points out,

The interviews that you do or that you study are not asocial, ahistorical, events. You do not leave behind your anxieties, your hopes, your blindspots, your prejudices, your class, race or gender, your location in global social structure, your age and historical positions, your emotions, your past and your sense of possible futures when you set up an interview, and nor does your interviewee when he or she agrees to an interview and you both come nervously into the same room. Nor do you do so when you sit down to analyse the material you have produced.¹⁴⁴

This study is based on my own interpretation of the interview data. I aimed to represent the interview participants in a fair and accurate manner, and treat their thoughts, ideas and opinions with respect. I interpreted the data from my position as a 23-year-old Pākehā female. Like many of the participants in this study, my knowledge of Aztec culture before visiting the exhibition was very limited. I did not study the Aztecs at school or university, and have not visited Latin America. I see this lack of prior knowledge as an advantage rather than limitation of my position as researcher, because my experience of the exhibition was similar to what participants described during interviews.

Limitations

The sample was small in proportion to the total number of visitors to the exhibition, however it was diverse in terms of demographics, and participants provided a range of perspectives. By the twenty-third interview, I felt that I had achieved theoretical saturation, meaning that the same issues were being raised by participants and fewer pieces of new information were being provided with each new interview.¹⁴⁵ I did not have ethical approval to interview anyone aged under 15 and my youngest interviewee was 22 years old. The sample is therefore not representative of all visitors to the exhibition, however a representative sample was not the intention, as discussed

¹⁴³ Elliott, *Using Narrative in Social Research*, 154.

¹⁴⁴ Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing (2nd ed.): The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005), 67.

earlier in the chapter. Because just one exhibition was studied, and one group of visitors, the extent to which generalisations can be made about all touring exhibitions, or about the way visitors interpret another culture in international touring exhibitions in general, is limited. It should be noted that this study is part of a broader research project which investigates *Aztecs* across all three venues and examines issues other than visitor experience

Summary

This chapter explained how the research design for this study is influenced by the literature reviewed in Chapter One, with its emphasis on gaining qualitative insights that illuminate visitor meaning-making. The methodology was informed by hermeneutics and phenomenology, and involved narrative-based in-depth interviews with visitors. The chapter also explained that the use of follow-up interviews is a response to calls for methods which provide long-term visitor insights. This study also follows calls for a better understanding of how visitors' emotions, backgrounds and ideas of "self" and "other" affect the way they construct meaning. Brief profiles of the participants were included in this chapter to introduce them to the reader before the findings are discussed in the following two chapters. The inclusion of the profiles also provides a sense of participants' diversity and is consistent with narrative and meaning-making approaches in which individual biographies and context are considered relevant for interpretation.

Chapter Three: Impressions of Aztec Culture and Mexico

Introduction

In this chapter, the focus turns to the findings of the research. The chapter addresses the first research question: What are visitors' impressions of Aztec culture, and of Mexico more generally, produced through their experiences of *Aztecs*? It also sets the scene for the following chapter, which analyses visitor meaning-making in greater detail by investigating the second research question. Together, the two findings chapters determine the ways in which visitors experienced and understood Aztec culture through the exhibition. Many participants were surprised by what they experienced in the exhibition, realising that they knew very little about Aztec history or culture prior to their visit. Several admitted to getting Aztecs confused with Incas or Maya, or thinking that the Aztec Empire flourished much earlier than it did. Several participants mentioned that they appreciated the inclusion of a timeline at the beginning of the exhibition, which compared Aztec history to what was happening in other parts of the world at the same time. The focus of this chapter is participants' overall impressions and evaluations and how these were informed by different aspects of the exhibition. The effect of the "balanced" and "complete" portrayal of Aztec culture on the visitor is also examined. The main aspects discussed here are the practice of human sacrifice, and more "mundane" aspects of everyday life such as education and agriculture. The chapter also investigates impressions of the Spanish conquest, before looking at participants' impressions of Mexico, before and after their visit.

When analysing the interview data for this chapter and the next, I focussed on particular codes, disregarding those which were relevant to the wider study but not the specific questions addressed by this dissertation. Relevant codes were those regarding emotions, cultural similarities and differences, reactions to particular objects, and thoughts about various aspects of Aztec culture including human sacrifice and everyday life. It should be noted here that words in italics are direct quotes from participants. Underlining denotes emphasis in participants' speech and words in bold indicate key parts of a quote.

Human sacrifice

Nearly every participant commented on the Aztecs' practice of human sacrifice. The exhibition covered religious aspects of Aztec culture, in line with the objective that visitors would "Examine the gods, temples, and human sacrifices of Aztec religion."¹⁴⁶ The model of the Templo Mayor (Figure 3.1) was surrounded by a range of objects including sculptures of various gods, and several items used during sacrificial rituals, such as a stone upon which sacrificial victims had their hearts removed. Reactions towards human sacrifice varied among participants. The range of reactions demonstrates the extent to which visitors interpret exhibitions according to their background and prior experience, as discussed further in Chapter Four. The way that participants responded to sacrifice as a cultural practice clearly impacted on their impressions of the Aztecs.



Figure 3.1 The 1:10 scale model of the Templo Mayor. Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

Elements of the exhibition relating to sacrifice made Marcus, who described himself as “*squeamish*”, uncomfortable. He said:

My stomach started churning, it was getting a bit kind of like ‘oh gross’.

MBA student Dylan made no mention of sacrifice until asked directly:

¹⁴⁶ Owen and Svendsen, ““Aztecs’ Front End/Formative Evaluation. Stage One Qualitative [Focus Group] Findings. Final Report,” 4.

*Now you mention it yes, yes maybe my mind found that **quite abhorrent** so I blocked it.*

Dylan went on to describe sacrifice as:

*Very very uh foreign, **totally foreign**... it was pretty abhorrent I thought... I think was it- **people offered themselves even**, it was just that whole practice, **quite disturbing** reading that over and over again as I walked past.*

Aaron, a scientist, commented that:

Just reading more of the information about the sacrificial culture that was associated with the Aztecs... was in a sense very sobering.

Grace, an artist, said she was aware that sacrifice was practiced in Latin America before her visit:

*But to kind of have it in your face, yeah that was a bit of a **culture shock** I suppose (laughs).*

She later said:

*I guess the whole sacrifice thing for me from a... cultural viewpoint... was **difficult**.*

In contrast, antiques dealer Lorraine was matter-of-fact about sacrifice:

*Because that's just how that society operated and other societies have operated that, but at different times in history so, that **I did not find disturbing**.*

Basil, a farmer, was intrigued by sacrifice and would have liked to learn more, commenting that there “*could have been a lot more horror*” and:

*What **I was curious** to know was actually how gruesome, how morbid, how awful were some of these past civilisations? How bestial were they?*

Rachel, a student, was unperturbed:

*The gore of the sacrifice bit was **pretty good, pretty entertaining**, (laughs) it's always **very interesting** to read about.*

Encountering information and objects relating to sacrifice tended to produce negative impressions of the Aztecs. In relation to this aspect of the exhibition, words including “*bloodthirsty*”, “*primitive*”, “*gruesome*” and “*alien*” were used.

Basil was fascinated by Aztec weaponry:

*The weaponry that they used amazed me actually, with the design, to maim rather than kill and that could be used for sacrifices. It was a very **gruesome** sort of society wasn't it?*

Jill, an artist, was “quite amazed” at:

*How violent they were, what **a violent society** it was...*

She later remarked that:

*It's surprising anybody survived the way they all behaved, it just seemed so **ruthless and cruel**.*

Julie, a retired teacher living in the UK, saw Aztec culture as:

***Completely different** in the sense that **we value life much more than they do...** human rights, people's personal treatment and right to live was not there...*

For Marcus, a statue of a priest wearing someone else's flayed skin was “somewhat traumatic”. In his first interview, he recounted his reaction to the statue:

*I didn't pick up on it the first time passing by, it was only when I came back out I was like, 'oh my god that guy is wearing someone's skin!' and then like you see the little floppy hands and the floppy feet and everything so then we kind of started talking about that and I think that really just compounded the like '**oh my god these people are gross, what the hell?!**' (laughs)... and then I just kept picking it up everywhere, I kept seeing it in different little stuff and all the [codices] and it was quite gross.*

Despite being matter-of-fact about sacrifice, Lorraine found that it had a strong impact on her impression of Aztec culture. In her view, the Aztecs were “alien” and:

Very primitive...** because you didn't see examples of learning, of understanding... that you see in a lot of other cultures, like there wasn't... that they understood sacrifices so **they sacrificed all the jolly time**, there didn't seem to be an understanding of sciences, there didn't seem to be an understanding of agriculture, their artwork was fairly rudimentary, so basically it was **a pretty primitive society existing in isolation from other areas of the world that were highly developed...

These reactions indicate the extent to which Aztec religion, and specifically human sacrifice, impacted on participants' impressions of the Aztecs. In many cases, this part of the exhibition produced stronger reactions than any other. However, other aspects of Aztec culture often produced contrasting impressions to those included in this section, and also had a strong impact on overall impressions of the Aztecs, as discussed in the next section.

Everyday life

Learning about aspects of everyday life in Aztec society appealed to many participants. Te Papa staff wanted visitors to “Journey into the everyday lives of the people of this ancient culture.”¹⁴⁷ The exhibition covered topics such as music, education, sport, agriculture and art. It contained objects including jewellery, household wares, musical instruments, and models depicting Aztecs going about their day-to-day lives. These aspects of the exhibition provided a broader, more sympathetic understanding of Aztec culture, rather than a negative perception centered on human sacrifice. The more “mundane” aspects of Aztec culture tended to produce favourable impressions of the Aztecs. Aztecs were described using words such as “*advanced*” and “*sophisticated*”.



Figure 3.2 A model depicting a marketplace scene. Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

Many participants commented on a model of a busy marketplace scene (Figure 3.2), complete with sound effects. Reflecting on the model, Aaron found that it caused him to see past the “*dramatic aspects*” of Aztec culture:

It’s easy to be distracted I suppose by some of those more uh dramatic aspects of Aztec culture, but you have to appreciate that life goes on for the

¹⁴⁷ Owen and Svendsen, “‘Aztecs’ Front End/Formative Evaluation. Stage One Qualitative [Focus Group] Findings. Final Report,” 4.

other many, tens of thousands of people, they have to eat and sleep and trade and you know be wealthy or at least strove to have wealth and all that sort of stuff.

Marcus was impressed with the Aztec education system, and recalled a conversation he had after his visit:

I was like, ‘wouldn’t it be great if we did it like the Aztecs did, and kind of like taught everyone some kind of trade so if they had to they could fall back on it in hard times?’

Gordon, who once lived in Central America when working in the military, approved of the way Aztec society was organised:

*I think the way they organised themselves... is to be **admired** really... I think the way they organise their society, considering how long ago we’re talking about, and **the way they actually looked after everybody and all that organisation that they had**, considering where they are and knowing the climate that I do, it must have been a bit of struggle to live there as well.*



Figure 3.3 A model depicting chinampas (floating gardens). Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

Several participants were particularly impressed with the Aztecs’ use of chinampas (floating gardens) (Figure 3.3). Maths student Isaac remembered being:

*Just kind of awed by like you know this kind of civilisation they’ve been able to make you know just like the **ingenuity** in terms of some of the building of the chinampas and stuff...*

Basil described the chinampas as “*amazing*” and “*tremendous*” and said that the Aztecs were “*quite an **advanced** civilisation.*”

Similarly, Valerie, a Friend of Te Papa who visited the exhibition twice, thought the chinampas were “*very **clever***” and “*quite **sophisticated** really.*”

In contrast to his impression that “*these people are gross*”, Marcus was amazed at:

*How they came up with this perfect little thing, oh and the fact that they were like rooted with willow trees, like anchored down, well **these guys are genius, we could learn a lot.***

Robert, a retired teacher and Friend of Te Papa, echoed the idea that we could learn from the Aztecs:

*I just thought to myself, because what that did for me was I thought ‘now here we go, we have an environmental crisis on our hands, **this is something from way back which could be of use to us**’.*

Different forms of art also impressed participants. Jill, Gemma and Grace, all artists themselves, made comments that suggested a change in the way they perceived the Aztecs. Jill, who was struck by the Aztecs’ “*violent society*”, was amazed by the stone carvings:

*I mean they’re so old and I’m always blown away by how **technologically advanced** a lot of these ancient civilisations were and I guess a lot of us **don’t realise that unless you go to these sorts of exhibitions.***

Gemma, who trained as a jeweller, was struck by how “*anatomically correct a lot of their sculptures were*” because:

*You think back to kind of the perception of that time period was that it was all very kind of primitive and whatnot, but **they actually really kind of understood proportions and all that kind of stuff which kind of surprised me.***

Grace was similarly impressed:

*I was amazed at **the depth of the technical development** in so much of the material culture that was done with very basic equipment, so the ornamentation... all the possible thought process that was behind so much of the ornamentation and the symbolism.*

The comments in this section reveal the effect of including aspects of everyday life in the exhibition, rather than focussing solely on religious rituals or the lives of elites.

Doing so provided visitors with an insight into the day-to-day lives of Aztec

individuals, and avoided a one-dimensional view of their culture. Two participants mentioned “balance” in relation to the exhibition.

Valerie commented that:

*There’s a lot of aspects of the culture I don’t like, um the whole sacrifice thing, but I sort of thought they put things into context quite well. They did explain that you know... it was considered an honour and all that sort of stuff, but then there was all **the aspects of the culture like the music and that sort of thing**, so I kind of thought well **it was reasonably balanced**, I thought even though I’m sure a lot of what people will remember is the whole sacrifice stuff... but I still thought they did it quite well.*

Reflecting on she and her granddaughter’s contrasting reactions towards human sacrifice, Sally remarked that:

*Oh it’s **a balancing act** isn’t it? When you’ve got a story as powerful as that there’s so much to tell.*

By being “balanced” in their approach, Te Papa’s exhibition development team avoided a “narrow, stereotyped view of Aztec society and culture”¹⁴⁸ which, as discussed in Chapter One, previous Aztec exhibitions were criticised for.

Spanish conquest



Figure 3.4 The “Fall of the Empire” section of the exhibition. Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

¹⁴⁸ Brumfiel and Millhauser, “Representing Tenochtitlan: Understanding Urban Life by Collecting Material Culture,” 6.

Telling the story of the fall of the Aztec Empire, the section of the exhibition about the Spanish conquest (Figure 3.4) included a Spanish suit of armour, a portrait of Hernán Cortés, and a painted screen depicting scenes from the conquest. Participants often had emotive reactions to learning about the Spanish conquest, describing feeling sad or angry (see next chapter for discussion of emotion and empathy). Participants had sympathy for the Aztecs, sometimes despite previously making comments about them being “*bloodthirsty*” or “*violent*”. Some shared a feeling of regret as they reflected on what was lost as a result of the conquest. These reactions revealed a level of respect for Aztec culture, and at times suggested that participants were able to identify with the Aztecs. Although several participants managed to “see the world through Aztec eyes” (see next chapter), no one did the same for the conquistadors.

Gemma identified what she saw as a “*contradiction*”:

*What struck me the most was the fact that when the Spanish arrived the Aztecs actually really welcomed them in, because they were so **trusting**, it's one of those contradictions because everyone knows about the Aztecs kind of sacrificing people and being quite a bloody kind of society and then all of a sudden, the Spanish came to invade them, they were like, 'Oh hi! How's it going? Oh shit you want to kill us all.' Ha! And it was that **really weird kind of contradiction there that they were so trusting and welcoming of the white man and yet this, yeah this 'savage' people, quote unquote, were completely decimated.***

Basil (who talked about the Aztecs being “*gruesome*” and the “*horror*” of sacrifice) described the conquest as “*jolly sad*” and went on to say:

*To me it's **a tragedy** actually, the civilisation that it was conquered in such a way, **it's a blight in history**... like Inca history that's a parallel with the Inca civilisation, the destruction of a civilisation...well it happened, we can't change it now, but to me I suppose, it was **a sad thing** that something like that happened and so there's the **tragedy** there as well, to me, and **it's very revealing in one way I suppose of us as human species actually what we do to each other... because the history of the Aztecs is to be quite treasured.***

Dave, a Health Coach with an interest in ancient civilisations, demonstrated his empathy for the Aztecs when he said:

*The Spanish came to the Aztecs with guns and everything and **you can just imagine if we were just here and then someone turned up in a spaceship 1000 years in the future, that's as foreign as what it was to them.***

Marcus expressed regret at what was lost as a result of colonisation:

*I actually came away thinking... **imagine if Europeans hadn't explored**, if we'd just kind of left all the society groups like Māori and Aztec as they were and we came across them now or something, **how fascinating it would be, how rich and diverse it would be**. And I actually came away from it thinking that Mexican society could've been a lot, I don't know, richer. A lot more diversity or a lot more in tune with their local environment you know they kind of understood the way the lakes worked, and they farmed them the correct way and stuff whereas you kind of have **conquistadors coming in and destroying their knowledge, their religion, their everything, yeah, I kind of almost thought they were the poorer for it**.*

When asked if there was anything in the exhibition that seemed familiar to her, Rachel said:

*Yeah indigenous cultures like here even with **Māori people in New Zealand** and European people and that kind of... yeah that sort of... **awful 'transition' to new cultures and things**.*

Learning about the demise of the Empire piqued participants' interest, with several people commenting that they would like to learn more about the conquest and its aftermath. When reflecting on the conquest, participants shared positive impressions of the Aztecs. The Spanish conquistadors were not perceived in such a positive way, with Myles commenting that the exhibition reinforced his view that the conquistadors were “*real scumbags*.”

Impressions of Mexico

In keeping with the objective that visitors would “Recognise that Aztec history, culture, and language continue to inspire cultural and social revivals today”,¹⁴⁹ the exhibition ended with a small segment called “The Aztec Legacy.” This segment included a Mexican flag, and information about the Day of the Dead and the Nahuatl language, which is still spoken by millions today. Although it made up only a small part of the exhibition for reasons explained in Chapter One, perceptions of modern Mexico were studied as part of this dissertation. Due to the literature on cultural diplomacy, I was interested to know whether the exhibition had an impact on visitors' impressions of contemporary Mexico.

¹⁴⁹ Owen and Svendsen, “‘Aztecs’ Front End/Formative Evaluation. Stage One Qualitative [Focus Group] Findings. Final Report,” 4.

Many participants shared negative impressions of modern-day Mexico when asked the question: What were your impressions of Mexico before you visited the exhibition? These preconceived ideas were commonly influenced by the media rather than first-hand experience.

*I don't have much feeling or interest for Mexico because of the horrendous drug cartels that seem to be functioning around there, all the **horror stories coming out of Mexico make pretty gruesome reading**, places where I've been, people have been found machine gunned, whole roomfuls of people slaughtered, **I have a very horrible vision of Mexico now, actually...** (Basil)*

*I mean you just think of the huge population, incredible, I mean all I think of Mexico is **a city built on a swamp, absolutely uncontrolled population growth, incredible poverty and held sway by the Catholic Church**. So still **superstitious... nonsense**. Sorry! (Lorraine)*

*I mean it's still **in the news quite regularly**, because it's one of the main areas of **gangs and drugs** and that kind of stuff and that's pretty sad actually because I always wanted to take the boys there but I'd definitely think twice about doing it now. (Gordon)*

*I guess my **ill-informed-other-than-what's-on-the-news-take** on Mexico is it's a place that's under a fair bit of pressure at the moment and it's not obvious what the answers are in terms of where Mexico can go, so yeah, I guess **connotations and views of Mexico probably a bit negative**, not a blaming of Mexican people but they've ended up in a **pretty awkward situation** by the sounds of things. (Geoff)*

*All I ever hear about it is **drugs and violence** and I've never really been tempted to go there. (Valerie)*

In contrast to the negative impressions of Mexico above, several participants wanted to visit Mexico after visiting the exhibition. This suggests that the exhibition sparked their interest in a way that allayed any negative impressions they had of the country.

Gemma said she still wanted to visit Mexico, despite being influenced by TV:

*Crime shows, you know the baddies are running off to Mexico... which doesn't give me, subconsciously a very favourable impression of Mexico... **but I guess it is still somewhere I'd like to visit**.*

Isaac visited Mexico, Guatemala and Belize between his first and follow-up interviews and said that the exhibition played a part in his desire to travel:

I was really kind of inspired by it.

Maria, who is well-travelled but has not visited Mexico, found that the exhibition piqued her curiosity:

You know it definitely does make me more, even more curious to go and check it out.

Harry, who studies sociology and is interested in creative writing, had a similar response:

Actually going to the exhibition makes me want to go to Central America and South America, and see the different cultures.

When asked whether the exhibition had changed their impression of contemporary Mexican culture, several participants felt that it hadn't, and others had difficulty relating Aztec culture to modern-day Mexican society.

Yeah no I couldn't see any connection with the current Mexican culture there. (Basil)

I dunno I'm not sure about contemporary Mexican culture so much because obviously it was yeah, focussed on Aztec time. (Isaac)

I don't think I would really feel much different about contemporary Mexico... (Valerie)

I don't really think I... can relate, there weren't many clues about contemporary Mexican culture. (Maria)

I don't know that it's changed at all really, I suppose I sort of meld it all in together, because from ancient things come modern things. (Jill)

Several participants commented that they would have liked to see more about the contemporary relevance of Aztec culture in the exhibition.

I think maybe they could've had a bit more about contemporary Mexican culture, 'cause it was very, at the end... there was just a little bit of information. (Rachel)

I guess they could have perhaps had a little bit somewhere about contemporary Mexico, even just some leaflet to take away or something. That might have given you a better impression than drugs (laughs). (Valerie)

Others reflected on how their impressions of Mexico had changed for the better due to an increase in understanding. None of the participants had a worse impression of Mexico as a result of their visit to the exhibition.

Andrés, from Colombia, said:

I think it opens people's minds a little bit and it makes them understand and respect the Latin American cultures.

His wife Helen agreed:

*I think that although you know in the back of your mind that it's a country that has a lot of history and, you know, different culture, it's easy to forget that when you're thinking about modern-day Mexico and **so going to an exhibition like that reminds you to be thoughtful** of those matters and when you're looking at the society as it is today or meeting people from Mexico just to **remind yourself about how that history might affect who they are.***

Gordon commented on the inclusion of the Mexican flag in the exhibition. The coat of arms at the centre of the flag depicts an eagle sitting on a cactus, eating a snake. It is a reference to the Aztec legend surrounding the founding of Tenochtitlán, and Gordon was surprised to learn this:

*I was impressed that it actually made a nod to the Aztecs, because **I originally thought that they would've, they'd actually just wiped that slate clean** because they didn't want to acknowledge some of the traditions and some of the things that had gone on.*

Gemma reflected on her increased understanding of contemporary Mexican society:

*I think **I do kind of understand it a little better and I've got more of an appreciation of their lifestyle** 'cause my understanding of the Mexican people is that they are still quite devout even if they are devout to Christianity rather than to their gods. So that kind of **makes a bit more sense** and yeah, **I wouldn't say that Mexico was the safest place in the world either, but yeah that maybe is more of a subsequent thing, not really related to the Aztecs.***

The exhibition significantly changed Harry's ideas about Mexico and the contemporary relevance of Aztec culture:

I thought of Mexico as being something that was completely taken over by Spain.** And that any lingering culture had been burnt out... that in a sense the Aztecs had been completely destroyed. I'd never really looked at the Mexican flag as closely, and understood it in a way that I do now... I had thought of the people as being really, just like New Zealanders, you know, just migrants who have created their own culture, but are just in a sense, European. And so that yeah, **it was really good, because it's that whole like, breaking of what you think, the tearing down, the knowing that you don't really know anything, and then learning more. And that's what makes me want to go to those places, to see what is still remaining, because it seems like that culture hasn't completely died, it is clearly a Christianised and hugely Catholic nation now. But they still hold on to Aztec beliefs which, kind of linger in different ways.

Despite the relatively small amount of information about modern-day Mexico in the exhibition, some participants reported that their impressions of contemporary Mexico changed for the better as a result of their visit to the exhibition.

Summary

The interview extracts discussed in this chapter provide an insight into the ways visitors formed impressions of Aztec culture and modern-day Mexico through experiencing the exhibition. Participants' comments demonstrate that different aspects of Aztec culture produced different impressions, and that although elements concerning human sacrifice tended to produce negative impressions, participants often left the exhibition with respect for the Aztec way of life. The inclusion of information and objects relating to everyday life was essential for creating a broader, more sympathetic understanding of Aztec culture beyond human sacrifice. By striving to portray Aztec culture in a "balanced" and "complete" way, those who developed the exhibition successfully avoided presenting a one-sided view of Aztec culture centering on ruling elites, the aesthetic value of the objects or human sacrifice. The chapter also outlined participants' impressions of Mexico, and the extent to which the exhibition influenced those impressions. A lack of information about modern-day Mexico in the exhibition meant that preconceived negative ideas about Mexico remained unchanged for some participants. However, those who wanted to visit Mexico were influenced by an interest in Aztec culture, sparked by their experience of the exhibition. This chapter has set the scene for the following chapter, which discusses visitor meaning-making in greater detail.

Chapter Four: Cultural Meaning-Making

Introduction

This chapter responds to the second research question: In what ways do visitors to the *Aztecs* exhibition “make meaning” about Aztec culture? It elaborates on the findings outlined in the previous chapter by analysing the visitor experience in greater detail. It explores the meaning-making that helped create the impressions discussed in Chapter Three. Drawing on the literature review in Chapter One, this chapter examines the key strategies participants used to “make meaning” about Aztec culture. These strategies included identifying similarities and differences between cultures, empathising with Aztec people and relating to them through objects. When trying to interpret Aztec culture, many participants showed a desire to “connect” to Aztec people and understand their lifestyle. The chapter begins by considering how participants’ identity and prior experiences influenced the way they interpreted the exhibition, before discussing cultural comparisons, empathy and imagination, and finally objects and emotions.

Identity

As discussed in the literature review, it is widely acknowledged that meaning-making is influenced by a person’s background and sense of self. According to Silverman, “Whether or not one possesses expert knowledge, relating what is seen to one’s self, life, and relationships is a key feature of visitors’ meanings in museums.”¹⁵⁰ The interview data for this study included many examples of this. The use of narrative-based interviews was key to gaining an insight into aspects of participants’ identity and how these impacted on their exhibition experience. Like Schorch, I found that during narrative interviews “visitors narrate their biographies into the museum experience and the museum experience into their biographies.”¹⁵¹ When telling the “story” of their visit in response to the SQUIN, participants often shared details about their lives that illuminated the way they interpreted the exhibition.

¹⁵⁰ Lois H. Silverman, “Meaning Making Matters: Communication, Consequences, and Exhibit Design,” *Exhibitionist* 18, no. 2 (1999): 12.

¹⁵¹ Schorch, “Museum Encounters and Narrative Engagements.”

Gemma was drawn to a colourful Aztec shield because it reminded her of the jewellery she makes and the way she feels when wearing it. Her comment supports Paris and Mercer's theory that "visitors recall meaningful objects during museum visits that elicit feelings relevant to their own personal identities".¹⁵²

*My jewellery that I make is quite big and bright and colourful **and I often see it as a shield and kind of a protective thing** and I think I kind of dress quite similarly as well... my perception is that people then look at the jewellery and not the person wearing it and I feel that that's quite comforting for me personally. **And I felt that... like a shield kind of mimicked the way that I live, a little bit.***

Like several other participants, Gemma reflected on religion and how her own views impacted on her ability to make sense of Aztec beliefs:

*Although I admire it, the faith, the belief that they had in God is something that is **completely foreign to me**, so I don't really... I don't believe in anything really beyond my everyday existence which is quite close-minded but it's just something I don't spend my time thinking about, it's not something that I've thought about and made you know a decision about, it's just something that doesn't really affect the way I live, so you know, they're doing these brutal acts on people because they believe so strongly that if they don't do it something terrible's going to happen. **So that for me is quite hard to understand.***

Harry was particularly interested in a life-sized model of an eagle warrior because he knew about eagle warriors through playing the popular computer game *Age of Empires*. The last part of this interview excerpt fits with Doering and Pekarik's comment that "the most satisfying exhibitions for visitors will be those that resonate with their experience and provide information in ways that confirm and enrich their view of the world":¹⁵³

*I think I've always had an interest in warrior nature and the different ways that has kind of manifested in different cultures so whether it's Nordic or I think for me the South Americans definitely have this really strong kind of image and so **when I saw it, it was reinforcing all of those things that I was already thinking about or carrying in there.***

As a mother, Heather was particularly affected by the sacrifice of children:

¹⁵² Scott G. Paris and Melissa J. Mercer, "Finding Self in Objects: Identity Exploration in Museums," in *Learning Conversations in Museums*, ed. Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley and Karen Knutson (New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 418.

¹⁵³ Zahava D. Doering and Andrew J. Pekarik, "Questioning the Entrance Narrative", *Journal of Museum Education* 21, no. 3 (1996): 20.

*You know **that hit me quite hard** and I think **that's probably at the stage I'm at in life with little kids** and I found that a little bit, not upsetting, but it you know **it made me really, yeah, sad.***

Andrés' identity as a Latin American was central to the way he interpreted the exhibition. His sense of pride and his use of the word “we” demonstrates that for him, the Aztecs were not the cultural “other.” He felt that the exhibition helped the family members he visited with understand aspects of his culture better:

*I mean during the exhibition I [was] **talking about how proud we are of our past** and how, I mean now these guys saw that and understand a little bit more why I like, why we like the colours, why we're like uh a little bit noisy sometimes with the music and stuff like that.*

The above interview extracts represent just a small selection of comments participants made about how their identity impacted on their exhibition experience. Participants' backgrounds and prior experiences clearly influenced the way they interpreted the exhibition, as demonstrated in further extracts throughout this chapter, as well as in the previous chapter.

Cultural comparisons

Participants also used their prior experiences and knowledge to compare and contrast cultures. To help them interpret Aztec culture, and in particular human sacrifice, they often drew comparisons across time or place. When asked how Aztec culture compared to their own or other cultures that they were familiar with, participants often used phrases like “*completely different*”, especially as a first response to the question. However, all were able to identify similarities between Aztec culture and either their own or another culture. Participants' comments provided an insight into ideas of “self” and “other” produced by the exhibition.

Marcus described Aztec culture as:

Completely different to everything I'm familiar with or used to.

However he went on to note that both Aztecs and Māori treasured greenstone and that in both cultures:

It's a real sign of I guess mana or the equivalent of whatever it is, you had to be top dog to have it.

Gemma identified an aspect of day-to-day life that she suspects is similar in every culture. She also noted that religious beliefs in Aztec society differed to those of “modern societies”:

*I think **there are lots of things there that were quite similar** you know they've got similar... jobs, for want of a better word... you've got your farmer you've got your craftsman and stuff so that's, I guess that's just life in general, and everyone, **every culture seems to have those people I suspect** but yeah **I think this kind of overall firm belief is something that's lacking in modern societies.** And today it's kind of considered unhealthy to have such a strong belief in something that would lead you to... to you know killing people for the sake of making sure the sun rises tomorrow, **it just doesn't quite compute with anything that we live in today.***

Valerie compared Aztec society to Medieval Europe, using the time period to contextualise “awful” parts of Aztec culture:

You've got to see it in its time** I mean it's 1200-1500, if you compare it with **Medieval Europe** at the same time there'd be a lot of things about Medieval Europe that would be pretty awful as well. **I don't think we can compare to our culture at this time.

Dylan compared Aztec society to:

European feudal times and even ancient Egypt where they had slaves.

Like several other participants, Dylan likened the *Aztecs* exhibition to an earlier touring exhibition at Te Papa, *Egypt: Beyond The Tomb*. When asked what was similar about the two exhibitions, Dylan said:

I think it's just the objects like stone and the fact that you've got the pyramid and that time period as well, a long time ago.

For Andrés, identifying similarities between Aztec culture and his own Colombian culture was a highlight of his visit to the exhibition. He said the exhibition “*pulled me back in time to get close to stuff about our Latin American cultures.*” He was able to compare different art forms, marketplaces and the loss of culture through conquest:

*Well it's **comparing everything** I mean in different ways it's uh- **we're coming from the same sort of idea** and for me it's **just remembering where I'm from**, it's that simple you know, it's just great.*

Several participants commented on hierarchy or social structure, sharing a range of ideas about how society was organised in the Aztec Empire and by other cultures. The number of times social structure was mentioned suggests that it was an aspect of the

exhibition that participants found easy to draw comparisons with, although comments were often vague in terms of who the Aztecs were being compared to. Many shared the idea that although the Aztec lifestyle in general was difficult to compare to, the social structure was familiar in terms of other cultures they were familiar with, if not their own culture. Social hierarchy was therefore one aspect of culture that made participants realise that Aztec culture is not as unfamiliar as they first thought.

Julie felt that although the Aztec “*attitude to life*” was “*completely different to anything we have now*”, power structures were “*similar to today’s lifestyle in many other parts of the world*”:

*Well the feeling was that that lifestyle then **was just completely, completely different to anything that we have now** and that was the main feeling, like a **completely different world and attitude to life**, ruled by forces, power that they made themselves really, all the power, what powerful people instilled in their people, which **actually is very similar to today’s lifestyle in many other parts of the world**, so yeah.*

Similarly, when asked how Aztec culture compares to his own or other cultures he was familiar with, Basil’s first reaction was to say:

*It’s so **vastly different** there’s no comparison!*

However he went on to comment on hierarchy:

*The aristocratic families they’re born into and the high priests it’s **a familiar story** isn’t it, many many cultures you look at... and different religions you see parallels there as well.*

When asked the same question as Basil, Robert said:

*How does it compare? Does it compare at all? Because it was so hierarchical, and **New Zealand is not really a hierarchical country**.*

Marcus also reflected on hierarchy in New Zealand:

*Well as much as we say we’re egalitarian in New Zealand we’re totally not but, there is **a lot less kind of disparity between classes and sects of society** than I could gather from Aztec times, and it was very difficult for people to-
[upward] **mobility was very difficult**.*

Aaron mentioned social hierarchy in terms of cultural similarities:

*Certainly the royalty of you know the very top of the tree I think was very exclusive and was effectively by birthright, which I guess **has similar things to us today**, so maybe that’s a similarity in an odd kind of way.*

Aspects of the exhibition about hierarchy were familiar to Rachel:

A lot of it... made a lot of sense like, the whole really hierarchical thing was like, 'yeah, definitely know about a lot of cultures that were like that'.

A number of participants contemplated life and death and how Aztec beliefs contrasted with those of present-day New Zealand society. Three males in their twenties, Harry, Dave and Myles, were fascinated by Aztec practices relating to death, and spoke in detail on the subject. Their comments suggest that they admired this aspect of Aztec culture.

In Harry's view:

*The Aztec culture seemed that there was this, the focus was a spiritual one. And those people that were sacrificed, it wasn't a negative experience for them. They would be reborn in a different way, and they were willing to do it, which **completely goes against... the ideology that we have towards death, as being finality, as being something to be feared. As opposed to being something that is just to be accepted.***

For Dave, Aztec attitudes towards death were a source of inspiration:

*Their respect for death was just as much as life. So if anything **it encourages you to live your life with purpose...***

Like Harry, Dave reflected on the different attitudes towards death, noting that Aztecs were:

*So in-depth with their life after death, and **it's something that we seem to lose now**, we think 'ok someone dies, we have a funeral and then we burn them and then it's done', it's like that person is gone. But yet, we talk about ghosts, we talk about... you know spirits but we never really think 'ok' and this is, I'm talking about **maybe in the modern world people maybe are scared of it or they don't want to talk about it because it's a morbid subject...***

Philosophy student Myles noted that Aztec attitudes towards death are "very different from our own" because in New Zealand:

*People who are dying are shunted off to rest homes or hospitals or whatever and just palliative care has a very kind of marginal sort of status, and **we don't really talk about death** and it's just kind of, **it's not a big part of life**, as it were, or **not much is made of it**, it's just kind of, **we sort of try and ignore it. Whereas uh I think in Aztec society, it was really interesting how death was just kind of like quite strongly incorporated into like their worldview, and stuff like that. So part of it was like obviously their practice of human sacrifice but also I think, like because warfare was quite central in that society and also maybe just 'cause of like you know an agricultural society relying on this kind of cycle of like harvests and seasons and stuff and yeah this kind of***

*emphasis on death and regrowth and whatnot. So I thought all the stuff that was related to that was pretty interesting 'cause **it demonstrates an aspect of their culture which is like very different from our own.***

Some participants expressed the idea that as fellow humans, we have more in common with Aztecs than we might like to think. Comments of this nature were often made when a participant was contemplating human sacrifice as a cultural practice, and highlighted the need to be mindful of cultural context.

Geoff took into consideration “*the context of the times*” as well as the world today:

*The sacrificial aspect is extremely removed from where we are today, but **in the context of the times** you could, I mean yeah it's not like people don't kill each other in large numbers today, **so how different are we?***

When describing how he felt about seeing knives used for human sacrifice, Geoff reflected on “*cultural distance*”:

*I guess it's an aspect of humanity that you kind of realise that maybe as individuals we're actually not too far away from... the **cultural distance** between where we're at and what they did is literally that, **it's simply a cultural practice** and (laughs) **we're not necessarily very far away from that.***

Heather expressed similar thoughts:

*It makes you stop and think '**actually have we changed that much?**' Because you go to an exhibition like that and you think 'thank god we don't have child sacrifice anymore' but actually there are children dying around the world all the time from things that they shouldn't be dying of, so you know, **it's interesting to think about your response and how actually it relates to the current world situation...** Yeah because **it's easy to think 'what violent people! We're so much more civilised than that', and actually we're not** (laughs).*

When asked how his background in philosophy helped him to interpret the exhibition, Myles spoke about cultural contingency. Like Geoff and Heather, he reflected on “self” and “other” as well as the importance of cultural context:

*I'm kind of conscious of how our way of life, it's quite sort of contingent as it were. **We kind of think of features of our own society and our own way of life as being kind of like the norm. But I guess we kind of forget that a lot of people live and have lived like, very differently,** so our own cultural perspectives and stuff are just kind of um, I'm not gonna say like historical accidents or anything, but they, they're such that they could so easily have been different. Or **our own attitudes could easily have been different if we lived in a different time and place...***

Reflecting on the world today in his follow-up interview, Basil said:

*A wee bit more war's going on **in the world today** actually than they had then, and there are thousands of people dying, I mean it's a horror scene around the world...*

Robert echoed this idea:

*I don't suppose we should really be surprised at [sacrifice] given what's happening **currently around the world** and the Second World War etcetera.*

This section on cultural comparisons has revealed the extent to which participants attempted to place Aztec culture in relation to other cultures they were familiar with, including their own. In some cases, doing this caused participants to reflect on their identity in relation to the Aztec “other”, prompting questions such as Geoff’s “*so how different are we?*” Taking into consideration “cultural context” produced the idea that the practice of human sacrifice was perhaps not as unfamiliar or incomprehensible as it seemed at first. The findings in this section fit with Smith’s theory that visitors negotiate cultural meanings and affirm and create definitions of “self” and “other.”¹⁵⁴

Empathy and imagination

Another method of meaning-making involved attempting to see the world from an Aztec perspective and imagining life as an Aztec. Often, this was done in an attempt to understand aspects of Aztec culture that were difficult to relate to, most commonly when contemplating sacrifice. Participants did this to varying degrees of success. Literature reveals that attempting to see “through the eyes” of the “other” is a recognised method of meaning-making. Schorch calls it a “window to the Other”¹⁵⁵ and it is also discussed in recent literature in terms of empathy.

In response to the shock of “*confronting death*”, Marcus attempted to “*get in the head*” of the Aztecs, but was unsuccessful:

*You were confronting death, which is something we're totally not used to, but this society was entirely- **so it's trying to get in the head of them, which I can't understand** so it wasn't upsetting it was just kind of like so, I'm so unused to it, it was a bit of a shock.*

¹⁵⁴ Smith, “The Cultural ‘Work’ of Tourism,” 230.

¹⁵⁵ Schorch, “Experiencing Differences and Negotiating Prejudices at the Immigration Museum Melbourne,” 55.

Rachel tried to imagine what it would have felt like to be a human sacrifice, but echoing Marcus' "*I can't understand*" comment, found it difficult to imagine something so unfamiliar:

*I don't know... the feeling 'cause it's not like fear or disgust... it's more like 'I don't really understand how people could've, um sort of been in that situation' must've, **I don't understand (laughs) how they must've felt, like whether it would've been understandable for them** or whether it was still very scary, I don't know.*

Gordon tried to put himself "*in the others' situation.*" He was aware of his position as the "*outsider, looking in*" and this caused him to reflect on different cultural contexts, and acknowledge that the Aztecs were not as "*bloodthirsty*" as they might initially seem:

*Initially, on the face of it, they actually seemed quite a bloodthirsty race. But then, that's from our perspective and having done lots of travelling and seeing lots of different cultures **I try to put myself in the others' situation.** Having actually been pretty much in a situation where I'm the outsider, looking in, **you've got to distance yourself from that kind of thing. That would be normal to them. So sacrificing babies, humans, to them that was just a way of life and if they were brought up in that culture, you wouldn't know any different. It's a bit like in other countries around the world really.** So on the face of it, yeah so it was a bit bloodthirsty, but I thought really... it's not something that we would obviously condone in this day and age. But not knowing any different, **you can't really judge them on today's values and morals and our own personal values and morals compared to what they were used to.***

Encountering information about human sacrifice sparked Harry's imagination and led to an empathetic response:

*You know that whole um, the actual removing bits of them... **I could really imagine myself in that situation.***

Harry also mentioned the model of an eagle warrior (Figure 4.1) in his follow-up interview and when asked why it had a lasting impression on him, he said:

*And it was just so big... that **I could seriously have a sense of like hundreds of these guys coming at you... and the terror that would have induced. Or even being one yourself** and the honour of putting that- of like embodying that spirit.*



Figure 4.1 A life-sized model of an eagle warrior. Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

When asked what allowed him to put himself “in the shoes” of others, Harry mentioned several factors. He described himself as an empathetic person:

So I will take on the feelings of others perhaps more than some... and I have a very overactive imagination so in that sense I could imagine myself being those people.

He also acknowledged aspects of the exhibition that allowed him to empathise, noting “the whole atmosphere of the place”, and:

It was definitely like I felt comfortable enough to be able to do that... if it had been done badly I don't think I would have felt that connection... as strongly.

In contrast to the examples above, Lorraine said:¹⁵⁶

The Aztecs [exhibition] was very removed, you were looking at it as an observer, you weren't actually being part of it.

She felt she was unable to look “through the eyes” of an Aztec due to the lack of a “personalised perspective”:

Personally I enjoy a personalised perspective because you can actually start looking at the era through the eyes of the person once you understand this is

¹⁵⁶ Here and in the next quote Lorraine is comparing *Aztecs* to a previous touring exhibition at Te Papa, *A Day in Pompeii*.

their comb, this is their perfume bottle, this is their make up, this is their pot, this is the chair they sat in...

She felt that death and religion were emphasised at the expense of aspects of culture that allow you to “*relate it to yourself and compare it to now*”:

*There wasn't a lot about (sighs) more about how people lived, there was a lot about death, a huge amount about religion, not a lot about agriculture, not a lot about employment, all those sorts of... **things that actually start to engage you because then you can relate it to yourself and compare it to now...***

Harry's comments suggest that the ability to successfully empathise with another culture through an exhibition depends on several factors, including the physical surroundings and aspects of the visitor's identity. A combination of factors meant that Harry “*felt that connection.*” Despite wanting to better understand life as an Aztec person, other participants were less successful at placing themselves “in their shoes.” Lorraine did not empathise with the Aztecs due the lack of a “*personalised perspective*”, which is discussed further in the next section.

Objects and emotions



Figure 4.2 A statue of the Aztec god of death and lord of the underworld Mictlantecuhtli, near the entrance of the temple. Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

Certain objects in the exhibition proved to be powerful tools for meaning-making by generating emotions that helped participants interpret information about the Aztecs and gain an insight into their way of life. Participants were often able to give detailed

descriptions of how particular objects in the exhibition made them feel. Participants described a range of feelings, using phrases such as “*it kind of put me on edge*”, “*my stomach started churning*”, “*it’s quite overwhelming*”, “*a little bit sad*”, “*quite disturbing*”, “*I was blown away*”, and “*awe-inspiring*”. Emotion is a key theme in recently published visitor studies literature. According to Smith and Campbell, “rather than being simply or solely a learning experience, heritage and museum visitors’ experiences can only be explained if the emotional aspects of their visit are taken into account.”¹⁵⁷

In some cases, the feelings objects generated were more memorable than the objects themselves. This was the case for Grace, who was particularly interested in objects made out of clay. When describing her reaction to bowls and eating tools she remembered:

That feeling of delight and a degree of playfulness on the part of the artist.

When asked which piece she was referring to, she could not remember its shape or form:

It was the emotion I can remember more than anything.

Grace’s comments provide an example of a participant feeling a connection to an Aztec person (in this case, the artist) through encountering an object. She was not the only participant to experience this. Harry provided an example where both the object itself and the feelings it produced were highly memorable. In both his initial and follow-up interviews, Harry described the statue of Mictlantecuhтли, Aztec god of death and lord of the underworld (Figure 4.2), as “*something I don’t think I’ll ever forget.*” In his follow-up interview, ten months after his visit to the exhibition, Harry spoke at length about his response to the statue:

It was kind of... like a feeling like you get when you’re going to visit a grave of a loved one years after the fact, so it’s kind of like that, it’s not misery or grief, but it’s that whole sombre kind of quiet sadness that kind of envelops death. And it kind of just had that aura, it had that effect... it was terrifying but there was a certain beauty to it... it was kind of like this stripped back of what we will all become in a sense and it’s, it was very... evocative... it was very moving... And to think that that was actually worshipped... Is even more powerful, it just reinforced that whole, because it was actually that physical

¹⁵⁷ Smith and Campbell, “The Elephant in the Room: Heritage, Affect and Emotion.”

um totem in a sense that was like people actually had worshipped that as a symbol of death and so there was even more power to it because of that, and a sense of connection to those people who are gone now, so yeah it was, that was very powerful for me.

Experiencing the statue led Harry to feel “*a sense of connection*” to the cultural “other”. According to Witcomb, “By engaging the viewer in a very direct and physical way, objects are able to activate an emotional response based, in part, on partial knowledge of what has occurred in the past and, in part, on the opportunity the installation/object provides to extend that partial knowledge through a simulation of dialog with those who experienced that past or that situation.”¹⁵⁸ Participants in this study provided several further examples of this. The value of conducting follow-up interviews was evident in comments such as Harry’s above. Ten months after his visit, he was still able to provide a detailed description of his response to the statue, revealing that the meanings he made were lasting, or in this case, “*something I don’t think I’ll ever forget.*”

The authenticity of the objects amazed several participants and allowed them to connect to those who made or used them. This was the case for Dave, who recounted the way he felt after being told by a museum host that the objects in the exhibition were real:

I said ‘how much of this stuff is actually real?’ and he said pretty much everything is real, and I was blown away you know it suddenly gives it that extra feel about it when you’re walking around and you’re looking at the stuff that people have created, what I, I must say I really liked about the exhibit was the fact I dunno some of the things were within touching distance? Don’t know whether you were supposed to or not I know some of them said ‘don’t touch’ but when it’s right in front of you you’ve got a big rock sculpture just almost just touching it, feeling it, thinking someone’s carved this, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, it’s really quite amazing.

Dave felt a connection to the sculptor. Later in the interview he said that the presence of “real” objects meant that the exhibition had “more meaning”:

For a moment you just feel quite humbled knowing that potentially someone’s life was committed to just that sculpture and making it so I guess the energy of the exhibit was heightened so much more when my, what could have been a silly question, was kind of answered that everything here was real and to me that gives me so much more meaning to it.

¹⁵⁸ Andrea Witcomb, “Understanding the Role of Affect in Producing a Critical Pedagogy for History Museums,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 28, no. 3 (2013): 267.

Rachel had a similar experience, explaining that the objects allowed her to connect to the people who originally used them:

It's always cool to see things that are like hundreds of years old... and be like 'wow, someone used that once' (laughs).

Replicas and models also acted as effective meaning-making tools, sparking imaginations, inspiring affective responses and creating a deeper understanding of Aztec culture. A life-sized model of an eagle warrior was one of the most commonly mentioned objects, despite the fact that it was not an “authentic” artefact.

Isaac found himself imagining seeing an eagle warrior in battle:

Well it is very kind of visually impressive and I imagine it could be pretty intimidating seeing it in real life if you're in a battle or something and there's this guy like half eagle or something...

Marcus described the way he felt in response to the same model:

*The guy with his feathers and stuff, I was like 'this is incredible' it's such like **an awe-inspiring moment** kind of thinking 'wow', the level of sophistication of that, absolutely incredible, so yeah, a bit of that, a bit of awe.*

The marketplace model helped participants “make meaning” because they saw it as a visual representation of the Aztec way of life.

Commenting on the marketplace and another model, Gemma said:

*I think nothing really explains to someone just how it was as well as **an actual sort of reimagining of the exact way they would've lived.***

Heather remarked that:

*It's so visual and they actually have mock little people and you see everything in its place, and **it makes it easier to sense what it was like.***

Andrés expressed his enthusiasm for the marketplace model, which allowed him to “see Latin American culture”:

*I really liked the models they made for the market, where all the exchange happened; where **you see Latin American culture** as such... it's all very small scale, but very well done, and very real, because **you grasp the whole concept of how it was handled.***

Another way that visitors experienced Aztec culture was through the model of the Templo Mayor. It contained information and artefacts relating to Aztec beliefs

surrounding death, sacrifice and the afterlife (Figure 4.3). These included a mask made out of a human skull.



Figure 4.3 The interior of the temple. Photograph courtesy of Te Papa.

Harry liked that the temple gave him a “*different perspective of how they thought about death.*” He described the atmosphere in the temple:

*Going into the underworld and having **a sense of dread and just chills up your spine** which was actually really good... that was a positive experience even though it was kind of like, I guess you would say they were **dark emotions** but I guess in that moment it was like **serene and kind of eerie** but it was good, I enjoyed that...*

In his follow-up interview, Andrés gave an in-depth description of how the immersive experience in the temple affected his senses and increased his understanding of Aztec culture. His comment provides another example of the value of long-term investigations into the visitor experience. Andrés’ response fits with Philipp Schorch’s theory that engagement with a visitor space starts on a “sensory, emotive and embodied level” and that feelings and emotions are interwoven with intellectual and interpretive processes:¹⁵⁹

*There’s some music in the background, some percussion music, and that affects you visually, **because you kinda feel that sound, that vibration, that***

¹⁵⁹ Schorch, “Cultural Feelings and the Making of Meaning,” 1.

music... and you realise that everything that's happening around you was part of a social system that existed, and that social system worked with elements such as music and that kind of guttural chanting, noises... you kind of understand that there's a ceremony, and the surrounding sound includes you in the ceremony...

The interview extracts above fit with the objectives Te Papa set regarding objects, which included “See the real thing, rare, uncommon, valuable”, “Think what it would be like to use, make, own such things” and “Imagine other times and places.”¹⁶⁰ As Gaynor Bagnall argued in her study into heritage sites, “emotions can play a key role in bringing the past to life”.¹⁶¹ In these examples, emotions inspired by objects in the exhibition enabled visitors to “connect” to Aztec people. Participants demonstrated that they wanted to better understand Aztec people, however as Lorraine pointed out, the exhibition lacked a “*personalised perspective*”. This meant that cultural differences were not “humanised.” Schorch argues that “the humanization of culture through ‘stories’ and ‘faces’” can lead to cross-cultural understanding.¹⁶² Participants in this study connected to Aztec individuals through objects due to a lack of “stories” or “faces”.

Summary

This chapter built on the previous one by discussing visitor meaning-making in greater depth. It explored the different ways participants made meaning and the aspects of the exhibition that played a part in the process, creating the impressions discussed in Chapter Three. Highlighting the agency of the visitor, the findings from this chapter demonstrate that participants “made meaning” about Aztec culture in several key ways. These meanings were influenced by participants’ sense of identity and prior experiences, which allowed them to identify similarities and differences between cultures and relate Aztec culture back to their own lives. Several participants were able to connect to Aztec people through objects and the emotions they inspired. The lack of a “*personalised perspective*” meant it was otherwise difficult to gain an understanding of Aztec individuals. Empathy and emotion, particularly in relation to objects, helped a number of participants gain an appreciation of the Aztec way of life.

¹⁶⁰ Te Papa, “Aztecs 60% Concept Design.”

¹⁶¹ Gaynor Bagnall, “Performance and Performativity at Heritage Sites,” *Museum and Society* 1, no. 2 (2003): 90.

¹⁶² Schorch, “Contact Zones, Third Spaces, and the Act of Interpretation,” 77.

Chapter Five: Conclusion



Figure 5.1 Flags of New Zealand and Mexico flying side by side at Te Papa.
Photograph by the author.

This research set out to study the ways in which visitors interpret a largely unfamiliar culture presented to them within an international touring exhibition. This was investigated through visitor research centering on *Aztecs: Conquest and glory*, on display at “Our Place”—Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington, New Zealand. The research was guided by two research questions which called for an in-depth investigation into visitor meaning-making. The results of the research demonstrate that through experiencing the exhibition, visitors were able to form a range of impressions about Aztec culture and modern-day Mexico. The research also shows that visitors can and do “connect” to another culture through a museum exhibition, and discusses the ways in which they did so in *Aztecs*.

An introductory chapter described the exhibition and the rationale behind the study. It also surveyed the relevant literature. The literature review revealed a paucity of research into international touring exhibitions, especially in terms of visitor research. While it is claimed that international touring exhibitions have the ability to enhance international understanding, there is a lack of empirical evidence to prove this claim. Twenty-five years after Tarasoff pointed this out,¹⁶³ the idea that museums contribute to international understanding remains largely untested.¹⁶⁴ This dissertation forms part of a long-term, transnational study which aims to respond to the current lack of research by determining the extent to which touring exhibitions contribute to cultural understanding between countries and how this objective can best be achieved.

Aztecs, which presented a culture so unknown to the majority of its New Zealand audience, provided the perfect opportunity to study the impact of an international touring exhibition on its audience. The study was approached from a visitor research perspective because without conducting visitor research, it is unclear what visitors think and feel. In order to determine the effect of *Aztecs* on its audience, it was vital that I approached the visitors themselves. Hooper-Greenhill's 2006 comment that visitor studies is a "rapidly evolving, controversial, and dynamic field"¹⁶⁵ remains true nine years on. Drawing on several current areas of focus within the field of visitor research, this study has added to the academic literature on visitor meaning-making, the use of narrative-based research methods and long-term visitor insights.

The qualitative methodology behind this research was informed by phenomenology and hermeneutics due to the study's emphasis on both human experience and the interpretation of meaning. Narrative-based interviews were conducted with twenty-three visitors to the exhibition in order to gain in-depth insights into visitors' thoughts, feelings and opinions. Wengraf's BNIM method¹⁶⁶ was chosen as the best way to access the visitor perspective. Follow-up interviews were conducted with eleven of the original participants, revealing lasting impressions and how meaning-making was affected by participants' subsequent experiences.

¹⁶³ Tarasoff, "Assessing International Museum Activity: The Example of International Travelling Exhibitions from Canadian Museums, 1978-1988."

¹⁶⁴ Davidson, "Visitor Studies: Towards a Culture of Reflective Practice and Critical Museology for the Visitor-Centered Museum."

¹⁶⁵ Hooper-Greenhill, "Studying Visitors," 362.

¹⁶⁶ Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-structured Methods*.

The success of these methods is evident in Chapters Three and Four, which presented the findings of the research. Chapter Three responded to the first research question: What are visitors' impressions of Aztec culture, and of Mexico more generally, produced through their experiences of *Aztecs*? The findings demonstrated that some visitors' impressions of Aztec people and of modern-day Mexico were changed through experiencing the exhibition. The chapter revealed how experiencing different aspects of Aztec culture created different (and often opposing) impressions. By providing a "balanced" and "complete" view of Aztec culture through the inclusion of information about the everyday lives of Aztec people, the exhibition broadened preconceived understandings of Aztec culture. Some visitors were able to empathise with the Aztecs. Many participants shared preconceived negative impressions of Mexico, but some had their impressions of modern-day Mexico changed as a result of their visit to the exhibition, despite a relatively small amount of information about the contemporary relevance of Aztec culture. The range of impressions, opinions and reactions recorded in this chapter highlights the extent to which aspects of visitors' identities affected the way they made meaning, something which was discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

The focus of Chapter Four was the question: In what ways do visitors to the *Aztecs* exhibition "make meaning" about Aztec culture? The chapter discussed the different ways visitors enhanced their understanding of Aztec culture. It revealed the impact of visitors' sense of identity and prior knowledge on their meaning-making, as well as some visitors' ability to connect to the cultural "other" through emotions produced in response to the objects they encountered. The chapter also demonstrated that months after their visit, participants were able to recount their experiences in great detail, revealing that the meanings they made in the exhibition were long-lasting.

One limitation of this dissertation is that the research sample is not representative of the entire research population, meaning that generalisations cannot be made about all visitors to the exhibition. This dissertation studies a single exhibition at a single venue. Including findings from the other two venues was beyond the scope of this 20,000 word dissertation. However, the larger research project, of which this study is a small part, will compare findings across all three venues. As previously mentioned, it also studies a second international touring exhibition, *E Tū Ake: Standing Strong*. There is still much scope for further studies that aim to understand visitor meaning-

making in the museum,¹⁶⁷ and in particular, in international touring exhibitions. The effect of emotions, including empathy, in response to objects, is an area of visitor meaning-making that warrants further investigation. This study lays a platform for further in-depth, narrative-based visitor research. The methods used in this study proved effective at gaining a thorough insight into participants' experiences of an unfamiliar culture.

Some of the findings of this dissertation are supported by emerging literature. This includes the work of leading visitor research scholars Laurajane Smith and Philipp Schorch regarding objects, emotions and ideas of "self" and "other". Literature on the "transformative" nature of museum visits proved less relevant to this study, which is perhaps unsurprising due to the aims of the exhibition, which did not include enhancing or changing visitors' sense of identity. Due to its focus on an international touring exhibition, the research for this study differs from the work of the scholars who influenced it. As Davidson argues, "Touring exhibitions function as 'mobile contact zones' facilitating multiple forms of encounter between people, practices, objects and stories from contrasting institutional, cultural and political contexts."¹⁶⁸ This research corroborates Grincheva's idea that contemporary museums can be thought of as "vehicles for a 'trans-cultural encounter.'"¹⁶⁹ Grincheva points out that there is always a danger of misinterpretation of cultural content, which can lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflict.¹⁷⁰ Visitor research can help prevent this, as discussed in Chapter One. By demonstrating the ways in which visitors form impressions and make meaning about another culture, this dissertation offers valuable information to museum professionals aiming to create exhibitions that promote and enhance cultural understanding, an aim that may well become increasingly common considering that cultural diplomacy is reportedly growing in importance.

When a personalised or "humanised" perspective is lacking within an exhibition, visitors can gain an understanding and appreciation of another culture through the feelings produced by the objects they encounter. These feelings include empathy, which can enable visitors to imagine life "in the shoes" of the cultural "other". This

¹⁶⁷ Schorch, "Museum Encounters and Narrative Engagements."

¹⁶⁸ Davidson, "Border Crossings and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Touring Exhibition: An Aotearoa New Zealand – Mexico Exchange."

¹⁶⁹ Grincheva, "Cultural Diplomacy 2.0: Challenges and Opportunities in Museum International Practices," 41.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

research therefore demonstrates the ability of international touring exhibitions to promote intercultural understanding. It suggests their potential to act as powerful forms of cultural diplomacy that enhance relationships between nations and across cultures.

It is only fitting that the last word of this dissertation goes to the visitor. Basil, a farmer in his seventies and first-time visitor to Te Papa, knew very little about the Aztecs before his visit. He left the exhibition believing that “*the history of the Aztecs is to be quite treasured.*”

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Appendix A – Interview Schedule

Aztecs: Conquest and Glory visitor interviews

Initial questions

Before we talk about the exhibition, I thought it would be good to hear a bit about you. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and what you do?

Now I'd like to hear all about your visit to the exhibition. I was hoping you could talk me through your visit. Please tell me everything you remember, in as much detail as you can. You can begin wherever you like, and I'll just listen and I won't interrupt. I'm interested in your perspective and story, and will take some notes for after you have finished telling me about your experience of the visit.

Questions to prompt further response/follow-up:

What was the **reason you decided to visit** the exhibition?

Do you remember any **feelings** you had in the exhibition, and if so, what they were connected to?

Can you tell me about any particular **objects** that made an impression on you and why?

Were there things that seemed **familiar** to you? Did it **remind** you of anything?

Was there anything that seemed particularly **strange or foreign** to you? Why?

Can you tell me about any particular **information, interactives, stories or anything else in the exhibition** that made an impression on you and why?

Did you **discuss** any of the themes in the exhibition with other people while you were there? If so, what and with whom?

Summing up questions

What aspects of the exhibition have you **thought or talked about** since your visit?

How does **Aztec culture**/way of life compare to your own, or other cultures that you're familiar with?

Is there anything you saw in the exhibition that you would **like to learn more about**?
If so, what?

Have you visited a **similar exhibition** before? What? Where? How was it similar?

What were your **impressions of Mexico** before you visited the exhibition?

How has **your impression of Mexican society** changed as a result of your visit?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Do you have any questions about the research project?