‘Such a man would find few races hostile’: Imagining Dialogue between Experts and Aborigines in the Museum

Melbourne Museum’s new Aboriginal Centre, Bunjilaka, opened in October 2000. It contains a filmed imaginary dialogue between the famous anthropologist Sir Baldwin Spencer, who was Director of the Museum for almost 30 years, and one of his key informants, the Arrernte (‘Arunta’) man known as Irrapmwe (or ‘King Charley of Alice Springs’). The dialogue is framed as an argument, symbolising aspects of the changing relationship between Aboriginal people and other Australians.

This paper backgrounds the dialogue’s construction and, after a showing of the film, analyses it as a particular kind of reflexive reaction to the politics of representation in contemporary museums. Of particular concern are issues that have been openly discussed in reviews of Bunjilaka relating to anthropology, history, Aboriginality and modernity as an intersection out of which conflicting claims to truth emerge. Many commentators have stubbornly over-historicized what is essentially a work of fiction, and hence misjudged its primary function, which is to act as a condensed vehicle expressing Aboriginal people’s contemporary sense of identity. It is one thing to disagree with the terms of this identity and to react against some of the seemingly hostile elements of its expression. It is quite another thing to say that the dialogue misrepresents history, since the arguments staged there are that corner of history – Aboriginal history – which it is Bunjilaka’s mission to accurately convey.