6 The Role of Museums as 'Places of Social Justice'
Community Consultation and the 1807 Bicentenary

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Community consultation has become a standard policy response in the museum sector to social inclusion initiatives. It is also a strategy often used to avoid controversy, particularly in relation to the development of contentious or dissonant museum exhibitions (Watson 2007a: 2). This is because 'community consultation' is a phrase that implies a seemingly standard and straightforward process of meetings and discussions between museums and stakeholder communities, which are designed to arrive at consensus. The relationship between communities and the heritage sector, museums included, is, as Crooke notes, considered to have 'so natural an affinity that it hardly needs justification or explanation' (2010: 17). Moreover, the idea of 'community' often has a feel good component to it; it is a term that generates feelings of warmth and safety (Bauman 2001). Indeed, there is a real sense within the heritage and museums sector that community consultation is about doing 'good works', and it is something that professionals can feel warm and cuddly about (Smith and Waterton 2009). Nonetheless, the relationship between communities, however they may be defined, and museums is anything but straightforward.

This chapter examines the community consultation process that occurred at seven museums in England during the lead up to the development of exhibitions marking the British bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Museums, at this time, were faced with the opportunity of engaging with a range of community groups over how exhibitions should be framed, and the messages and meanings they should portray. Through interview material with curators and community activists and representatives, the chapter documents the issues that arose, highlighting in particular tensions between the expectations of museum professionals and community groups. This chapter also explores the reasons for these and, echoing similar arguments made by Lagerkvist (2006), suggests that controversy within the consultation process is not only inevitable; it is healthy and, moreover, has the potential to be productive. A fear of controversy on the part of museum professionals was perhaps one of the greatest underlying causes of tension; however, as we wish to demonstrate, 'controversy is opportunity' (Lagerkvist 2006: 65).

To understand why and how some of the tensions arose, and how controversy can be useful, we also argue that museums as institutions of representation play a role, however unintended, in the politics of recognition. Drawing on the work of the philosopher Nancy Fraser, we argue that museums become implicated in struggles for social justice, and that failing to acknowledge this can intensify tensions in the community consultation process. Much of the stress that developed during consultations over 1807 exhibitions can be understood as having been created by the existence of two very different aims for the consultation process. Communities saw the exhibitions as opportunities for the political recognition in contemporary Britain of the consequences of the history of enslavement and the exploitation of Africa. Museums, on the other hand, were more concerned about presenting a 'balanced' exhibition. The search for political recognition and social justice by many African-Caribbean communities, theoretically, should have found synergy with the then social inclusion policies and strategies of the British cultural sector. However, the very nature of 'social inclusion' policies, curatorial conceptualizations of the nature of 'exhibition', the need to balance competing community aspirations and the role of curatorial authorial voice meant that community engagement and consultation initiatives often created further unresolved tensions.

MUSEUMS AND COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

The power to represent, educate and shape 'collective values and social understandings' is often defined as the raison d'être of museums (Timothy Luke cited in Watson 2007a: 1). The ability of museums to govern or regulate the social values and attitudes that underpin a sense of citizenship, and that define a range of community groups and identities, is well documented (Bennett 1995; Witcomb 2003; Message 2009). Similarly, the resources of power that museums draw on in this process have been identified, and are based on claims to the authority of expertise, rationality and assumed neutrality, together with the institutional authority granted by the state to the museum (Walsh 1994; Bennett 1995). Recognition of this power has led to ongoing critical reflection by museum professionals and academics about the responsibility of museums to acknowledge and represent cultural and community diversity, which has obvious relevance for community consultation (see, for instance, Sandell 2002a, 2007; Witcomb 2003; Watson 2007b). External pressure from excluded stakeholder groups, together with the implementation of government social inclusion policies within the cultural and heritage sector, has also provided an impetus to British debates about the nature of museum and community relationships. Although the impetus for development of a critical debate within the museum sector owes a significant debt to outside pressure and critique, there has, nonetheless, been a genuine recognition within segments of the museum sector that it 'is people

who bring the value and consequence to objects and collections; as a result, if a museum cannot forge associations with people it will have no meaning' (Crooke 2007: 131). An extensive literature now exists offering case studies and critical commentary about collaborative museum and community projects (see, for instance, chapters in Karp et al. 1992; Watson 2007c; Sandell 2002b; Waterton and Watson 2010). Various disciplines that intersect with the heritage and museum sector, such as archaeology, have similarly generated a substantive amount of commentary on this issue (see, for instance, chapters in Marshall 2002; Swindler et al. 1997; Derry and Malloy 2003; Smith and Wobst 2005; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; see also Zimmerman 1998; Smith et al. 2003; Hoober 2006). What emerges from this literature are three key points. First, community consultation is time consuming but unavoidable, and more importantly desirable. Second, to be successful it requires honesty, trust, equality, respect and the development of long-term reciprocal relationships (Kelly and Gordon 2002; Kelly 2004; Zimmerman 2005; Crooke 2008; Kuwanwisiwma 2008; Ferguson 2010). Third, it is risky and fraught.

Participation in community consultation can expose heritage and museum professionals to community criticism and anger, particularly in cases where consultations are occurring over dissonant and hidden histories. Moreover, in advocating community concerns, museum and heritage professionals may also risk exposing themselves to criticisms from their peers or other community groups and stakeholders (Macdonald 1998; Davis 2007). Thus, curators experience considerable professional pressure as they become caught between the criticisms and demands of special interest community groups and the expectations of traditional audiences, their less critically engaged professional peers and funding bodies. Adding to curatorial stress is the fact that communities are not the homogenous and easily definable collectives that much of the literature and government policy tends to assume (Smith and Waterton 2009). Communities themselves can be riven with dissent and are themselves mutable; it will not always be clear whom to consult, or who has the authority to speak for community or other groups. As Watson notes, these issues can be so overwhelming that there is a tendency for museums to focus on the clearly defined, vocal and organized community groups (2007a: 2).

The tensions that make community consultation risky and fraught derive from two issues. The first relates to the ways in which consultation is conceived and defined in the museums literature. There is a tendency to assume that communities are simply there to be 'collected' or acquired (Watson 2007a; Fouseki 2010) and that consultation is about 'telling' communities what they need. This latter tendency falls within the social inclusion 'tick box' phenomenon defined by Tlili (2008), so that social inclusion becomes misunderstood as an exercise in simply bringing new audiences or more visitors through the museum door. In this process, as Smith and Waterton (2009) have argued, social inclusion simply becomes a cultural assimilatory

process concerned with getting communities to accept the legitimacy of, and 'share' in, the dominant celebratory national narratives and representations offered by many museums, rather than an engagement with democratizing exhibition content. Indeed, it is curious that social inclusion policies never appear to ask the question of how we can get traditional museum audiences (that is, white middle-class visitors) to visit those heritage sites of ethnic minorities or the working classes; the issue, it would seem, is always about getting the 'excluded' to visit the cultural sites of the 'included' (Smith 2008).

Underlying the phenomenon of consultative 'telling' or 'tick boxing' is often an unconscious adherence to the assumed educational authority of museums, and a desire to impart what the museum sector collectively may see as important or simply as unproblematic. As Lynch and Alberti point out 'there is nothing "post" about colonialism as a view of the world that still persists' in Britain, and thus there is a tendency for communities still to be perceived as the beneficiaries of museum largess (2010: 14). The second issue that makes community consultation risky is that tensions are *inherent* to this practice—indeed contestation and dissent are an integral part to the consultation process. This is because any collaborative project or consultation practice is ultimately about the negotiation of the distribution of resources of power.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION AND
THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

To help understand how and why community consultation is ultimately about the negotiation of power, it is useful to turn to the work of Nancy Fraser and the politics of recognition. Identity politics and the recognition of difference has become a pronounced and recognizable area of tension and conflict in recent decades. The idea of 'identity politics' is often dismissed as a nebulous or mischievous form of cultural conflict confined to certain marginal communities. Rather than dismissing identity politics, Fraser (1995) argues that the cultural politics of difference is not only legitimate but also fundamental to struggles for justice and the redistribution of resources. Central to Fraser's (2000) definition of the politics of recognition is the acknowledgement that community groups will make claims for recognition and acknowledgement both symbolically and in material forms, and moreover, that these claims will have implications for equity and for justice. In this model of recognition, identity claims and the acknowledgement of specific histories and social and political experiences of communities became an important plank in struggles for redistribution of resources. This is because the political and historical legitimacy or recognition given to identity claims will bolster and legitimise the special claims communities may have to the material resources

needed to achieve equity and parity of participation in political and social policy debates (Fraser 2001). The politics of recognition is based on the idea of justice that necessitates a 'dismantling [of] institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction' (2005: 73). Part of this dismantling is the questioning and challenging of historical narratives that facilitate the misrecognition of the identity claims of certain communities. Thus, recognition is about addressing misrecognition and identifying the 'social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication' that lead to cultural injustice (1995: 71). The model offered by Fraser does not require that all claims to recognition be given legitimacy. Rather, Fraser argues that public recognition must not in itself deny justice or parity to community or non-community members (2001: 35).

The use of Fraser's model of the 'politics of recognition' allows some rethinking about the nature of community consultation in the heritage sector. In the first instance, it illustrates how community consultation becomes embroiled in wider struggles for social justice and equity. Second, heritage and the representation of histories and identities by museums become understood as an overtly political process. Heritage and museum objects become more than just 'things' illustrating historical or cultural narratives; rather they can be reidentified as political resources in their own right given the cultural authority they have to represent or stand in for national and community identity (Smith 2006: 48). Third, expertise can itself be reidentified as its own community. As Smith and Waterton (2009) have argued, communities of expertise are not only communities in their own right, but through the community consultation process become embroiled in negotiation of not only their own access to resources of power and legitimacy, but also their own identities as 'experts', as their claims to authority are challenged. Fourth, in any multicultural society equality is a 'process that requires constant negotiation and policy up-dates' (Lagerkvist 2006: 55).

Community consultation is thus not simply a matter of canvassing community opinion; it is a process of negotiating recognition which itself has implications for social justice. The authority of museums underpins the legitimacy and representational power of the narratives that are privileged in exhibitions, and consequently consultation becomes part of the struggles for equity and social justice. This authority, pitted against the need for recognition by some community groups, can lend a certain intensity or emotional and political urgency to community participation in the consultative processes. With these insights in place, we want to turn to examining the consultative experiences associated with the development of British exhibitions marking the bicentenary of 1807. Recognition and acknowledgement were significant themes during 2007. While it is hoped that post-2007 'a national conversation' about the meaning of the history of British enslavement is now audible (Kowaleski Wallace 2009: 232), it is important to note that the history of British enslavement has been a hidden history

in British public debates (Gilroy 1987; Kowaleski Wallace 2006; Oldfield 2007; Dresser 2009).

METHODOLOGY

Semistructured interviews were conducted with 128 museum staff, policy-makers, academics, community activists and community groups involved in consultations over exhibition developments during 2007–2008 from seven museums. A problem with this body of information is the relatively poor representation of community voice in relation to those of museum professionals. In total twenty-four interviews were conducted with community representatives, representing a number of different self-identified African-Caribbean community groups, while eighty-eight were undertaken with museum professionals. A workshop (open-ended discussion) was also convened by the '1807 Commemorated' project researchers in 2008, and attended by eleven representatives from different African-Caribbean communities who had participated in museum consultations.

A key reason for this imbalance is the degree of resistance community representatives and groups had to being interviewed. A strong impression gained by the authors was that many community groups and/or their representatives had had negative experiences of consultation, and did not want to spend further time talking to us about the issue. Some of the reasons given for not wishing to participate in either the interviews or the workshop were that individuals were too upset or angry, and/or believed that, as they had not been listened to before, they were unlikely to be listened to now. It should be noted that one hundred invitations to the workshop were sent by e-mail and post to organizations and individuals who had been involved in consultations with the partner museums. Twenty individuals initially responded that they were interested in participating in the workshop. However, only eleven participants could participate on the day. One of us (KF) followed up the invitations to those who had not responded, and again the strong impression that was gained was that the low rate of responses reflected the negativity many felt towards the consultation processes they had experienced.

CONSULTATION PROCESSES AND
CURATORIAL ATTITUDES

Community consultation was undertaken in the museums studied for this project, largely through the development of small consultative groups (4–5 individuals) formed through invitation by museum staff who often drew on their existing museum networks. A few museums took a more risky and critical approach, and advertised in newspapers and other media outlets for interested communities and individuals to form consultative groups; others

invited community groups to undertake their own associated projects, often artistic in form; and still others took a more marketing-oriented approach, interviewed individual representatives, and developed focus groups. Although different models were used, the interview data we collected do not identify clearly which models worked best, although each was seen to have strengths and weaknesses by both museum staff and community representatives (see Fouseki and Smith in press for more detail). Moreover, as Lagerkvist notes, there is no 'right' model, and the core issue should be about keeping dialogue and negotiation alive (2006: 60). In general, however, consultative groups were asked to give feedback on the text and the selection of objects and images to be used in exhibitions. Only two museums structured consultation so that community representatives (often referred to as 'community consultants' by museum staff) could be actively involved in shaping the content of the exhibition, while none of the community representatives were involved at the final designers' stage of the exhibitions.

All of the curatorial staff interviewed considered that community consultation was 'really the core of the whole project' (07ComM90 2007)[1], or saw it as a way of 'giving it [the exhibition] less of a kind of museum context and more of a kind of people orientated context . . . it's always good to have other peoples' opinions . . . ' (07ComM66 2007). There was also a desire by some museums to 'develop long lasting partnerships by consulting with people right from the start' (07ComM55 2007).

Museum staff also often recognized the need to not simply 'talk' to communities, but to open dialogue, with one curator noting that in

> community consultation meetings you can't just stand up and talk, and talk, and talk, otherwise it's not consultation it's just talking. So you have to find the right balance between telling people what you want to do and encouraging people to comment and to give the impression that they are able to affect that. So if you go and say here's what we're going to do, they'll just say, 'oh you've already worked it out why do you need my help.' So we had to work that quite carefully. (07ComM6 2007)

Although there was a positive attitude to consultation, several of the staff interviewed expressed some trepidation about the consultative process. This was often expressed as concern over the difficulties certain practical issues caused, such as a lack of available funding to carry out detailed consultation (e.g., 07ComM55 2007). Another common problem was the often short lead up time between museums obtaining funding and the opening dates of exhibitions: 'But the trouble is we had so much restraint on us with time' (07ComM3 2007). However, for others their trepidation was based on more complex issues. For some community consultation was a new experience, as one person noted: 'To be honest this museum has never done any consultation whatsoever' (07ComM3 2007). As another noted,

lack of industry experience in consultation could leave staff isolated from colleagues who did not understand what they were doing:

> For some organisations, diversity of audiences and staff is a relatively new concept, one that the vast majority of people are not versed in. Not even versed in the basic language of, and therefore people working within large organisations can, can feel isolated, can if we're not careful, start to emulate the behaviours of the underrepresented feeling, feeling underrepresented ourselves. (07ComM125 2009)

Moreover, the consultation process could be actively questioned by colleagues who 'felt threatened that this was heavy-handed intrusion on professionalism' (07ComM125 2009). Some were concerned about their need to present a 'balanced' exhibition and expressed concern about involvement in controversy or conflict: 'We were trying to avoid anything that we know is too controversial' (07comM6 2007). Lynch and Alberti, in discussing their own experiences of community consultation, outline the various strategies staff used to avoided conflict in consultation meetings (2010: 22–23).

While some worried about this criticism, for others the process was a significant emotional challenge as they were confronted by their lack of knowledge about the dissonant history of the British slave trade: 'I think it was important to acknowledge that people were finding it emotionally difficult' (07ComM125 2009).

The emotional challenges together with the degree of commitment of individual staff to community consultation were acknowledged by some community representatives, who observed:

> It was a very difficult process because the curators and the museum staff were terrified. It's a very difficult history, but they took grace from actually engaging with people directly. (Workshop transcript: 6).

> Those who we engaged with, I can't stress that enough, the front line people were very sincere and they did want a change. (Workshop transcript: 7)

> I certainly think the museum wanted to engage with people, but I don't think they really thought about what that meant. (07ComC77 2007).

Although the commitment of museum staff was noted by some representatives it was also forcefully noted that a range of institutional factors undermined or impeded the effectiveness of consultation. Community representatives reported being aware that those staff doing the consulting were themselves often not being listened to by other staff or museum management, and that institutional factors such as shortage of time, lack of training in consultation and diversity issues, and staff turnover and funding issues,

among other things, hindered the consultation process. This, they noted, often meant that they did not feel staff could be fully engaged in consultations, despite stated commitments to it, which meant that communities felt that their concerns were not fully listened to or understood.

COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES

The overarching impression gained from the interviews with community representatives was that of frustration. Although representatives were impressed, overall, by the genuine commitment of museum staff, and many felt that they had gained or developed useful skills from their association with the museum, frustration is the dominant tone that emerges from the interviews. This frustration derives from the extent to which representatives and museum staff appeared to have 'talked past' one another, and the differing expectations about the process and outcomes that each had. The apparent commitment of staff to consultation was often undermined by the way the consultation process itself was defined and conducted. Fundamental decisions about the aims and content of the exhibition had, some community representatives found, been decided prior to the commencement of consultations, and, thus, as a number of people noted, they did not feel listened to:

> I don't think they were very successful to be honest [negotiations over the content of the exhibition] I think a lot of people would leave the meetings, they were a bit frustrated because they felt they were not being heard properly, but then again you start thinking that each person has his opinion and you can't satisfy everyone. (07ComC102 2008)

As a remedy to this situation community representatives considered that consultation should start at the

> very early stages before even they've written the first line of the panel and very early stages just to find out about how people feel about the very early stages of the exhibition, how people feel about, em, what's going to be in [it], how people feel about how they're going [to] engage, the type of exhibition they are [doing]. (07ComC101 2008)

> Consultation should have started from the moment they had the idea of designing the gallery they should have brought people on board from the very very beginning ok? They should have been open and prepared to take on the views and I know this is a very difficult thing . . . they should have brought them on board from the very beginning they should have been involved in looking at the objects, they should have been involved in looking at the material and telling them what they see,

what they think and what they understand and that should be part of it. (07ComC77 2007)

Overall, people did not feel that they were at all involved in a decision-making process. However, as one museum consultant noted, 'You have to accept that there is a consultation rather than a decision-making process: the museum tries to find another's views' (07ComM75 2007). Here we see a significant disjuncture about what consultation means. For communities it was to be about negotiation and engagement with the decision-making process. However, for some museums and their staff, particularly those faced with an array of community opinions, consultation was about getting others' views, but not necessary engaging in discussions about key decisions.

There is a fundamental philosophical issue here about the meaning of 'consultation', and at what point the idea of 'consultation' allows the possibility of *change*. In other words, is 'consultation' about getting opinions, or is it about the negotiation of issues fundamental to an exhibition? Does it include the possibility that curators and other museums staff could change their minds and their decisions?

This lack of sense of negotiation often meant that consultation was likened to box ticking:

> I felt that the museum was doing it was like a requirement for them to do those meetings . . . it was like ticking a box. (07ComC102 2008)

> What became clear to a lot of delegates, a lot of the people participating, even though the people working with us didn't view it that way, it was a rubber stamping exercise. We have already chosen the architect, we have already chosen the colours, we've already chosen the pieces, and we're only working with the artefacts in our collection. We appreciate that you want other pieces but we can't be bothered to go and get them, we'll allow you to see the terminology that we're using, we're allowing a few changes, we appreciate the concerns but we're going to do this anyway. (07comC107 2008).

> Whenever you do a consultation, it really does feel like you're just talking. There is no political will to change. (Workshop transcript: 11).

The difference between notions of consultation held by some communities and museums is powerfully identified here:

> So, I know even though they have consulted with somebody they don't understand what it means—it means community engagement and taking on board what they said and that's not happened, it didn't happen and it hasn't happened here. . . . I am not talking about people on personal level

> I think that they had the best of intentions, but I think they are not used to this, they are not used to this kind of work and I think there is a lot to be learnt . . . you want to consult with the communities it means you have to involve the community and show them that they have owned this project as much as you own it because in this present moment . . . I can't honestly [see how] people who were engaged in this programme could say that they owned this project because they were not allowed to own it, they were not allowed to own it. (07ComC77 2007)

The frustration many representatives felt, and the sense that they were engaged in a tokenistic or box-ticking exercise, was often reinforced by the limited amount of time that tended to be given to the consultation process. This issue was a significant one for museum staff, who also noted frustration with timetables. What constitutes sufficient time, however, is a difficult issue. Time was often constrained not only by museum timetables but also by those imposed by funding bodies, and the reality of a commemorative deadline. Staff were constrained by their diverse workloads, while community representatives were constrained by their own commitments (be that paid work, families, childcare, etc). However, what many, community representatives included, underestimated was the amount of time needed to discuss and mediate the emotional effect that consultations about traumatic subjects may have on communities and their representatives. As noted here:

> Because people do tend to bring their own personal baggage to this history, and it's unresolved, and it's impossible to deal with this history without actually addressing some kind of pain and harm that's in there. So time is needed. (Workshop transcript: 6)

As this person noted the consultation meetings that they were engaged in often went over the allotted time, as people negotiated and worked through these issues—and they went on to state that 'the fact people were prepared to give up time was seen as a positive of the consultation process' (Workshop transcript: 6). At another museum, it was noted:

> A big issue was that a big discussion started between black people and the people who work at the museum and it was only one, like one hour and a half or two hours these meetings and there was never enough time to talk about everything, you know, because people would start discussing a lot about things, you know, it was difficult. (07ComC102 2008)

The point here is that time was needed to work through and debate the issues with museum staff. Time was important also to mediate what were and are very emotional issues. Lynch and Alberti also report that cool professional discussions of issues of racism were unproductive for those attempting to deal with and communicate their own experiences of racism

and misrecognition (2010: 23). Moreover, sufficient time was also needed so that communities themselves could work through the issues they are confronted with. It is important to note that this may not occur only in formal meetings, but that representatives need time to go back to their communities and debate and discuss the issues *with* and *in* their communities. A point raised by some representatives was the amount of pressure put on them in the consultation processes by the assumption made by museums that their presence in consultative committees or groups meant that they could speak with confidence for diverse communities:

> When I came on [to the consultative group] as an individual I said these things are too big for me I have to share with the members of my community. (Workshop transcript: 20)

> I don't represent a community I might come from simply because I can't, well I do and I don't obviously. In the same way I represent masculinity or anything else or fatherhood because I am these things. At the same time I can't speak for all fathers and all men. In a similar way, I had to find myself constantly saying well I don't represent, I'm not the voice of the Afro-Caribbean community, I am an opinion that comes within that. (07ComC108 2008)

What is interesting to note here is that in the museums literature the sense of exposure and pressure on staff in the consultation process has been acknowledged (see Davis 2007). However, what has not been acknowledged is the amount of pressure put on communities and their representatives in this process. Just as museum professionals are exposed to criticism from their own communities of expertise, so too are community representatives. This lack of understanding or acknowledgement reinforces the argument that Watson makes that consultation becomes an acquisitive relationship, wherein communities are collected and boxes ticked (2007a: 2). Communities become an object to acquire rather than to engage with and understand. This may facilitate the strong perception expressed by one interviewee that museum consultation simply paid lip service to the social inclusion requirements of DCMS and the then Labour government:

> I think [consultation occurs] not simply because that people who run the museums are suddenly wise and wonderful, but it's because . . . there are new laws on our books so all these museums . . . they have to be seen, they have to be seen [to be] confronting racism, yeah? So that pushed, so they had to do that radical thing, they have to *be seen* to be going through [the motions], to be opening themselves, to see what they can do about engaging people so they [could] show and demonstrate that they are on track for including people that they didn't include before, because of racist structures, in the process of making the final

product . . . the point is what happens beyond that, the point is how open are the professionals in these spaces taking on the consequences or implications of engaging these people, because it's tough. There is a challenge when you are taking people who have been excluded before and bring them to the table, they will be asking questions. (07ComC89 2007; interviewee's emphasis)

So what really was the point of tension that meant that the consultation process, despite the intentions of many museum staff, could be seen to have failed or to have been perceived as box ticking? There are many practical issues that contributed to this frustration, such as lack of time, funding and so on (see Fouseki 2010; Fouseki and Smith in press); however, the fundamental issue is basically conceptual. As Fouseki (2010) has argued, many museum professionals were object centric in the way that they approached the exhibitions; often for museum staff it was all about what objects to choose from collections. As one person observed:

> Sometimes I got the feeling that, em, the people at the museum just had a fascination about all the objects they got, *'oh look at this object',* you know, and not thinking so much about the people who were talking in the museum. (07ComC102 2008; original emphasis)

Fouseki (2010) notes that communities were more 'people orientated', and were much more concerned about the stories, narratives and the language of displays than they were about the objects. Objects of course can be powerfully representative and vital in underlining and emphasizing the stories being told in a museum exhibition. However, the criticism that staff were object centric is not due to a misunderstanding by communities about the role of objects in museum exhibitions, but rather derives from a failure by museum staff to engage with the politics of recognition, as staff were not 'thinking so much about the people' whose history and experiences were being represented.

Acknowledgement of the histories and culture of Africa and the Caribbean and the consequences and legacies of the slave trade were key issues for most community representatives interviewed for this project. As Katherine Prior noted, expectations were high in 2007 for exhibitions, particularly given the poor record of acknowledgement in British cultural institutions of the history of enslavement and the enforced contributions of African peoples to the nation's wealth (2007: 202). As one person stated:

> [I would have liked to see in the exhibition] . . . what thriving countries were in the African continent before the slave trade, I just wanted this message, this is what Africa was like, this is what the transatlantic slave trade did to it, and this is how it looks like now, and this is the Caribbean and this is how the Caribbean looks like now . . . the

transatlantic slave trade basically created major destruction and Africa hasn't recovered from that. (07comC101 2008)

Community representatives reported that some of the key tensions they experienced were over the messages that they wanted conveyed as opposed to those that museums wanted to convey. It was important for many that the exhibitions had an effect on visitors. As one community representative noted, they wanted people to see the important and diverse history of Africa, so that 'when an English person sees you next time [they are] not just seeing a black colour, they are seeing someone, a person who . . . played a part in developing the world' (07comC74 2007). Others noted that they had wanted visitors to have an opportunity to evaluate not only what Africa and the Caribbean had lost, but also what Britain had gained, for instance:

> We then asked for things like, well, take a small little kingdom like Benin, another African Empire and relate it to maybe London, and try to evaluate what they have lost and what London has gained. (07comC79 2007)

An important issue in conveying the legacies of the history of enslavement and resistance was the degree to which interviewees thought it important to present clear and critical accounts of that history and to 'present a realistic picture of slavery' (07comC74 2007). One of the most frequent criticisms expressed by community representatives was that many exhibitions were sanitized:

> I would like to mention is that I am a bit disappointed with the exhibition because, I think in terms of experience, I felt that when you go in the space is very nice and very open and is very big but it's very white and clinical just very white, and it makes you feel quite light, you know, and when you speak about slavery, something really horrible, you should try to make the viewer see how horrible it was. What all those lights and the all those walls that are white I think it took away that sort of like horrible parts to it . . . it had so much light and the walls were so white, you know, and I thought that there was something missing. (07ComC102 2008)

The white and clinical display, and a focus on objects in the consultation process, misunderstands what is at stake for communities in the way that this history is portrayed. By applying the lens offered by the politics of recognition, we can understand the intensity of the concern that exhibitions speak to 'a realistic' depiction of this history, and for realistic, read one that acknowledges and speaks to the past and present experiences of African-Caribbean communities.

The politics of recognition also draws our attention to the sense that consultation cannot be defined as simply about collecting or canvassing views. It is a process that involves negotiation and debate. However, it is vital to note that this will not just occur between museums and communities, but also that it will occur within communities themselves. Communities will need time to negotiate what the history may mean for them and what may or may not be at *stake* in the way that history is portrayed. As Miriam Kahn observes, community groups will use museums as platforms to represent themselves to others, and in doing so may use the opportunity to work out their own internal struggles and agendas (2000: 70). This is not an abuse of the consultative process or museum time, but part of negotiating and assessing the political ramifications of engagement with museums. The politics of recognition reveals that consultation will inevitably be contentious. It is contentious because how communities and individuals are represented matters in very material ways. Contention, however, is not something to worry about. Willingness to engage in contentious debates is a tacit acknowledgement that people and the issues under discussion *matters* and are important. Moreover, as Lagerkvist (2006) argues, controversy is an opportunity to review professional and personal assumptions and practices that may get in the way of engaging with social diversity and pluralism. As Lynch and Alberti also observe, attempts by museum staff to avoid conflict only suppressed the politics of the process, and thus maintained the museum's cultural authority, while the push for consensus ultimately worked to exclude (2010: 29–30).

The degree to which community representatives were misrecognized in the consultation process is significant. The observation that museums were 'not thinking so much about the people' is reinforced by the misunderstanding that representatives could and did speak for whole communities, the lack of recognition of the pressures placed on representatives, and the failure to understand or acknowledge what was at stake for representatives and their communities. This lack of understanding or acknowledgement of the pressures and contexts within which community groups and their representatives worked acts to reinforce the impressions that many community representatives voiced to us that they were not 'listened to'. Exacerbating this process is the degree of misrecognition that museum staff also made about themselves.

Museum staff involved in consultation were not simply 'staff who did consultation'; rather they were community representatives themselves. The community they represented was that of the community of expertise (Smith and Waterton 2009). Staff talked about the pressure placed on them by other members of their own professional community who, ultimately, would judge their professional identity on the results of the consultation and the final exhibition content—in much the same ways as community representatives talked of the pressures they were under from other members of their communities. Staff also were aware that

they sometimes faced hostile criticism from communities despite their personal commitment to diversity issues—here the issue is that staff were recognized by the communities they worked with as representatives of a particular community with a particular power. That individual museum staff were sometimes themselves constrained in the power they could bring to bear on influencing exhibition content only adds to the sense of frustration that many (both staff and community representatives) felt about community consultation. Recognition that museum staff involved in consultation are community representatives, too, allows insight into the wider social and political debates within which community consultation processes occur. Ultimately, community consultation over 1807 exhibitions was about the negotiation of political resources, not only whose version of history would be privileged but also to what extent African-Caribbean communities could influence the way that they would or would not be given recognition.

CONCLUSION

Community consultation is a highly political and thus contentious process. However, understanding the wider contexts within which consultation is carried out is useful for understanding the sources of tension and conflict. It may also allow for the development of opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue with communities of interest. One of the issues to emerge from the literature on consultation is the need for honest and open dialogue; we would add that honesty requires a degree of both self-recognition and recognition of others, or a 'thinking about', of all the people involved in or affected by the consultation and exhibition processes. This will not mean that controversy and tension are avoided; on the contrary, it will probably mean that the field of negotiation gets more complex. Nonetheless, understanding what is at stake for players in the consultation process may mean that more opportunities will arise for the development of exhibitions that make a difference. A fear of confrontation and controversy will only facilitate the extent to which communities (both special interest and communities of expertise) talk past and misrecognise one another.

NOTES

1. Interviews cited throughout this chapter have been given reference numbers to maintain the anonymity of the individuals interviewed. The referencing system for interviews is as follows: '07Com' refers to the overall '1807 Commemorated' project from which this study derives, the use of a following M or C refers to either museum staff or community representative, the following number is the sequential number of the interview out of a total of 128, while the final number refers to the year in which the interview was undertaken.

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