

Rethinking 1807: museums, knowledge and expertise

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Abstract

Examining the museological shaping of the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade provides a means by which the role of museums in society can be reassessed. Through theories of governmentality this paper will study this relationship between institutions and the groups and communities they serve. The extent to which museums inculcate the dominant values of society into visitors and the way in which minority and dissenting voices are incorporated and 'managed' will be the particular focus of this paper. What will be argued is that museums as specific locales of knowledge and expertise operated in 2007 to perpetuate a particular 'vision' of the past, whilst dissenting histories did emerge, this 'vision' acted to obscure or assume alternative sources of information.

Key words: 1807 bicentenary, slavery, Britain, abolition, enslavement, governmentality

The marking of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade evoked a number of issues and concerns of especial importance for museums in Britain. This was, of course, an anniversary where the previously ignored, suppressed or forgotten histories of Britain's complicity in the enslavement of millions were brought to the fore. This traumatic history and its poisonous legacy of racism and discrimination required museums and galleries to design and create exhibitions and displays respectfully and sensitively. For many museum practitioners, the bicentenary, therefore, brought new means of practice into their institutions, to 'recover' and 'represent' these pasts. In this context, a number of museums sought to represent enslavement and abolition in a manner which was both inclusive and educational. Consequently, museums in 2007 were brought to connect, re-evaluate and redesign their position and purpose in their own communities and wider society. Examining the range of work within museums marking the bicentenary thereby serves to highlight how museums interact with, communicate and incorporate the wider populace. This necessarily raises questions as to the manner in which museums represent dominant and minority sections of society. It is argued here that museum exhibitions and displays, implicitly promoted a particular 'vision' of the past which acted to inform and reaffirm the dominant perceptions in British society. The extent to which the histories and knowledge of communities was incorporated to challenge this history is also questioned, as the ways in which alternative knowledge and expertise were incorporated is assessed. To analyse these processes the social function of the exhibitions and displays marking the bicentenary will be examined. Using theories of 'governmentality' the museological shaping of the bicentenary and the extent to which the issues raised by this anniversary impacted upon museum practice will be considered.

Marking the bicentenary

On the 25th of March 1807 Britain formally ended its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Although the outright abolition of slavery in the British Empire did not occur until 1838, the Abolition Act of 1807 has nevertheless retained a certain sense of power and place within cultural memory in Britain (Kowaleski Wallace 2006). It is recalled as the achievements of the 'saints' of the abolition movement, Wilberforce, Sharp, Clarkson and the Clapham Sect, and it is often accredited as the first successful human rights campaign (Hochschild 2007). The

marking of the bicentenary in Britain brought this myopic historical gaze under greater examination. African and African Caribbean groups within Britain in advance of the bicentenary of 1807 in particular criticised this popular memory of philanthropy over brutality (Rendezvous of Victory, 2009). In essence this drew upon Eric Williams's (1994) seminal work *Capitalism and Slavery*, which since its publication in the 1940s, has formed the basis of questioning and problematising the presumed altruistic motives of the Abolition Act of 1807. However, the recognition and discussion of the past and the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade has remained largely absent within British society (Walvin 1992). The complicity of British governments, businesses and merchants in the enslavement of millions has been an aspect of the past which is generally omitted from the national narrative and cultural memory (Oldfield 2007).

Within this context, the museum sector worked to develop a response to the bicentenary: one which attempted to reconcile the past with the present (Kowaleski Wallace 2009). A certain state of anxiety with regard to representing the history and legacy of enslavement and abolition pervaded the museum sector prior to the bicentenary year, resulting in a number of institutions seeking external advice and assistance (Heywood 2006). Museums initiated schemes of dialogue with community organisation and engaged in programmes of consultation with individuals and groups (Lynch 2007). Through these programmes and attending events such as the *2007 Bicentenary Cross Community Forum* (2005), museum practitioners were aware of the deficiencies of previous representations, and worked to bring a greater sense of acknowledgement within the wider public of the history and legacy of the British enslavement of Africans. Museums thereby sought to raise the profile of the 1807-2007 bicentenary, whilst informing visitors of the centrality of the slave trade to British history (Hall 2007). To accomplish this complex endeavour, one of the key features of the marking of the bicentenary within the heritage sector was its emphasis on a 'shared history' (Prior 2007). Museums reiterated a message that everyone was connected and part of the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade:

In 2007 we remember the courage and strength of all those who fought and campaigned against slavery – in Africa, Britain and the Caribbean.

British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, *Breaking the Chains*

At a number of institutions, visitors were confronted with reasons and evocations for remembering and marking the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade:

Why should we remember the slave trade in 2007?

Tyne and Wear Museums, *Remembering Slavery*

We will remember them.

International Slavery Museum

In this respect, museums reiterated the goals of the Government-sponsored agenda for 1807-2007, expressed through the Bicentenary Advisory Committee. Prominent members from the religious, heritage and media sectors were members of this influential committee, chaired by the then Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott. This group strove to promote the marking of the bicentenary across a number of forums, to aid the recognition that this was, in the words of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, 'everyone's bicentenary' (HM Govt 2007). As museums and the wider heritage sector worked to develop events, displays and activities which would address the manner in which the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade were significant to everyone, institutions faced similar issues. Museums at a local, regional and national level all encountered concerns regarding the representation of a traumatic past to a diverse public which was presumed to be largely unaware of the history and legacy.

To examine how this process was enacted within museums, to study the various practices and techniques which were drawn upon, notions of 'governmentality' will be employed. Whilst this approach has been prominent within the analysis of museum exhibitions over the last decade, it nevertheless provides a powerful tool to understanding how institutions attempted to communicate a different representation of the past, to challenge a dominant and entrenched

public perception. Utilizing theories of governmentality enables a discussion as to how these exhibitions and displays structured visitor experiences. This structuring provided a framework whereby a distressing and somewhat neglected past were brought to the fore. However, whilst many institutions sought to address these lacunae in public knowledge, the form of these representations served to reiterate the popular memory of abolitionism. In effect, this acted to defuse a traumatic history by controlling the extent to which visitors were engaged with the past and its effect on the present. In attempting to locate a 'shared history', institutions reflected a vision of the past that focused on motivating visitors to awareness and action not contemplation. Rather than forming an explicit agenda of institutions, this reiteration was largely borne through the funding structure and the notion of 'expertise' within the museums sector. Drawing upon a widespread survey of exhibitions and displays of approximately sixty institutions which marked the bicentenary, this paper highlights the manner in which museums implicitly reaffirmed the place of abolitionism in the representation of the past.

The analysis of governmentality

The theory of governmentality has been discussed and analysed within sociology, politics and economics since the early 1980s and forms a significant mode of analysis within studies of the workings of state apparatuses (Dean 1999). Although its origins and development are varied, most trace its main basis to the early writings of Michel Foucault. In an essay entitled, 'Governmentality', Foucault (1991) set out the genealogy of the modern liberal state, detailing the emergence of a distinctive form of government in Europe in the eighteenth century. Whereas previous modes of control under feudalism were mainly legalistic and enacted by a sovereign to 'govern the people', emerging forms of technologies, philosophies and knowledge led to a political system which ostensibly acted to 'govern for the people' (Rose and Miller 1992: 174). This entails the influence of government on all aspects of society, from the wider economic and political processes to the identities, habits, customs and even thoughts of the population (Foucault 1991: 93). As Rose (1989: 1) has highlighted, even that which we hold to be the very formation of our person are themselves subject to supervision and administration:

Thoughts, feelings and actions may appear the very fabric and constitution of the intimate self, but they are socially organised and managed in minute particulars.

To achieve this encompassing system of control, government is introduced and maintained through a myriad of institutions and agencies in society; not just politics, but welfare systems, church, charities, markets, hospitals and prisons (Dean 1994: 183). It is also conducted through the spaces and architecture of society, through discourse and through social life. The governance of the conduct of a population is not enacted overtly through violence and intimidation: it is far more understated. In essence it requires individuals to possess the agency to 'govern themselves' (Dean 1999: 12). Power in this way is not so much exercised as a means of imposing constraints upon individuals but of creating individuals capable of conforming to a regulated set of norms (Rose and Miller 1992: 174). This does not mean to suggest that there exists no space for agency and resistance or that individuals are passive automatons who are mechanically punched out (see Habermas 1987: 293). Foucault's analysis of power, control and discipline is far more subtle than this criticism suggests, as it reveals how agents turn themselves into subjects (Foucault 1982: 208). In this way government is the field in which technologies of control, interact with what Foucault termed the 'technology of the self'. Individuals thereby operate upon themselves, whilst the same 'technologies of the self' are fused into the structures of coercion and domination (Foucault 1982: 16).

The purpose of this form of government is to create a 'disciplined' population, one which maintains and reproduces the social system in the guise of the modern liberal state (Marlow 2002). Government therefore becomes concerned with the application of not merely laws which control society, but 'tactics', 'techniques' and 'practices' which create a particular rationale for society, a means of operating (Foucault 1991: 95). As a result of these formation of 'tactics', processes of government rely heavily on the use and application of knowledge and expertise (Rose and Valverde 1998). In the eighteenth century for instance, the establishment and institutionalisation of knowledge on biology, psychology and philosophy was employed to

create systems of government in prisons and hospitals founded on the principle of public and moral reform. The various actors and institutions which comprise what is termed 'expertise' can be said therefore to have, 'come to play a crucial role in establishing the possibility and legitimacy of government' (Rose and Miller 1992: 188). To analyse these structures of control and domination within modern liberal societies, the study of governmentality can be defined as the examination of governmental power, the techniques and practices by which it works and the rationalities and strategies invested in it (Dean 1994: 179).

Governmentality and the museum

It is the dual alliance of institution and expertise which have been used to advance the concept of governmentality within museum studies (Macdonald 1998: 3). Bennett (1995; 2002; 2004) in his examination of the modern museum within European culture has highlighted the role of the museum in the wider development of society. Bennett (1995: 18) traces the 'birth of the museum' to the eighteenth century, coinciding with the political developments highlighted by Foucault. The museum as a repository for national culture therefore acted as a means of installing the 'correct' values and norms within society. The museum is thereby viewed as a tool of social control, as a means of instructing society with the conduct and knowledge required in the rationale of that society. The museum in this manner provides a, 'mechanism for the transformation of the crowd into an ordered and ideally self-regulatory public' (Bennett 1995: 99). The content, form and structure of the exhibitions and displays could also inform the visitor with the required view and opinion. For instance, Bennett (2004) in his discussion of the representation of evolution and colonised societies within European museums also highlights how the chronological, spatial and material ordering served to promote the view of European racial and cultural superiority. Bennett (1995) observed the crystallisation of this public function of the museum in the nineteenth century creating institutions whose rationale was to inform, educate and 'cultivate' the population.

The origin of museums in this system of the ordering and instruction of society, to reform and improve, is thereby enshrined within the modern public museum. Museums still serve as tools in which the population is assumed to use to inform and educate themselves with (Bennett 1995: 126). Museums are still observed to be locales where behaviour, culture, knowledge and significantly identities are acquired. Coffey *et al.* (2004) for instance describes how museums in Mexico during the 1980s replicated and promoted the national narrative which emphasizes the role of the dominant Mestizo culture and identity. Lepawsky (2008) has also analysed how museums in Malaysia, through the structuring and content of exhibitions, have reiterated a unifying narrative for the Malaysian nation state. Witcomb (2003: 16) has, however, criticised Bennett's thesis regarding the governmental function of museums as fundamentally limiting. Two specific aspects are highlighted here; firstly, that the concept of governmentality in museums ensures that the various ways in which minority communities use museums to identify and communicate are overlooked (Brady 2008); secondly, that analyses of museums along the lines of governmentality neglect how museums are also constituted through, 'popular culture, consumerism and the pursuit of pleasure' (Witcomb 2003: 16). The thesis of governmentality and its applicability for museum studies is thereby questioned as insufficient for the study of the museum's role in society. Whilst Witcomb's (2003) criticisms do draw attention to the areas of weakness in Bennett's application of governmentality, it does not take into account the pervasive nature of governmentality described by Foucault (1991). Issues of, 'popular culture, consumerism and popular culture' are in this respect constituted through governmentality, they are part of the same system in which the museum operates (after Rose 1989).

Following from these criticisms of governmentality, that the structure of analysis prevents the recognition of resistance, this study whilst acknowledging Foucault's quite subtle analysis of power, utilizes notions of Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony within studies of governmentality. Hegemony defines the manner in which a dominant culture is replicated and accepted by a diverse population through practice, habit and custom (Gramsci 1971: 181-182). Significantly, hegemony also accounts for the means by which a dominant group moves to incorporate or assuage the demands of a minority group by sharing resources with it (Gramsci 1999: 192). Whilst this reinforces the security of the dominant group it also provides a means

of attributing an active vision of the minority culture, rather than assume their unrealised deception or passive acceptance of their domination (after Gramsci 1999: 211). Hegemony cannot, therefore, be regarded as a totality, as the oppressed or minority group can both influence and shape the hegemonic order at various scales (Gramsci 1971: 181). It is through this regard for hegemony and governmentality that the museum representation of enslavement and abolition in 2007 will be examined. Museums are, in this manner, places where cultural values are learnt and reaffirmed, but also the potential sites of dissent and resistance to the dominant narrative.

Governmentality, the museum and the bicentenary

At the outset, it must be acknowledged that the museum response to the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade was immense. The 1807 Commemorated project (1807 Commemorated, 2009) has recorded the occurrence of over 180 individual exhibitions and displays in various institutions across Britain. These events were spread throughout the bicentenary year, but were especially prominent during the anniversary of the passing of the act and during Black History Month (Fig.1).

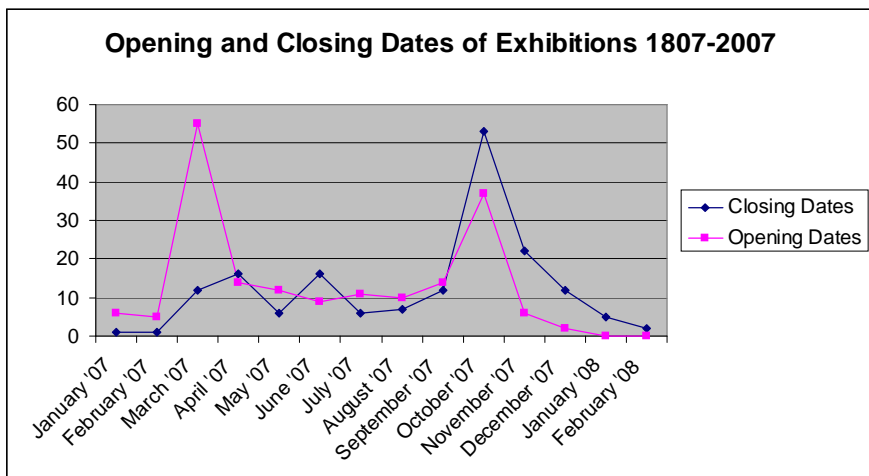


Fig. 1: Opening and Closing dates of exhibitions and displays marking the 1807-2007 bicentenary

Through the studies of governmentality, within the fields of sociology and politics, alongside Bennett’s (1995; 2004) analysis, specific areas of concern can be identified in the application of governmentality to museum representations of enslavement and abolition in 2007. The issues which will emerge from this study are fourfold:

- the messages that are being communicated through the exhibition
- the specific ‘technologies of the self’ that are provided by the exhibition
- the extent to which communities’ histories and perceptions were incorporated into exhibitions
- the nature of expertise within the museum

What will be explored, as a result, will be the way in which museum exhibitions and displays structured the history of enslavement and abolition, instructed and informed visitors, thereby inculcating particular visions of the past and present whilst incorporating or distancing dissonant voices. Such fine-grained analysis necessarily entails a nuanced and multilayered approach. As Macdonald (1998: 3) has observed, the use of governmentality within museum studies draws upon diverse forms of evidence:

...we should look towards the detailed tactics or 'semio-techniques' by which this may operate. Politics in other words lies not just in policy statements and intentions but also in apparently minor non-political and even 'minor' details, such as the architecture of buildings, the classification and juxtaposition of artefacts in an exhibition, the use of glass cases or interactives, and the present or lack of a voice-over on a film.

Therefore, to highlight the form and function of governmentality within these exhibitions and displays for this analysis, a necessarily limited selection from approximately sixty institutions has been made. However, this selection includes local, regional and national institutions which have all been examined for representational similarities within their exhibitions and displays.

Challenging, yet reinforcing the past

Through the study of the exhibitions and displays in museums marking the bicentenary, the manner in which the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade was addressed, yet ultimately reduced to the popular notion of abolitionism, can be assessed. In many museums marking the bicentenary, the reinforcement of the positive history of abolitionism, whilst paying limited examination to a history of complicity, occurs in various ways. It will be argued here that the very structure and content of these exhibitions constructed the visitor experience with the, 'view of the abolitionist'. Whilst this provides an ethical stance on the history and legacy of the slave trade, it is formed without an assessment of the responsibility or repercussions of Britain's role in enslavement. This mode of presenting the past was enacted through four particularly prominent aspects of museum representation during the bicentenary:

- Neutral definition
- Distancing of responsibility for the past
- Controlled emotion, engaged at specific junctures
- Exercise of ethics

The application of a neutral definition of slavery and enslavement was used within a number of exhibitions and displays. In these instances, the practice of enslavement was defined within a strict, formal dictionary-style sense. This form of presentation divorces all emotion and attachment to the subject to create the basis of a 'shared history'. This representation of the past for the present, whilst informative, acted to distance the history, thereby defusing a traumatic past. The use of a neutral definition of enslavement serves to present the history and legacy as 'evidence' for visitors to witness. A significant feature of this mode of representation is its use in the introductory sections of exhibitions. In this way, the first engagement visitors have with the exhibition is through this classification. Whilst it serves to stress the permutations of enslavement, it inevitably reduces a practice enacted by people against other people to an impartial category. Examples of museums in 2007 using this neutral definition are widespread; indeed, their similarity is quite striking:

What is slavery?

- Slavery exists when a man, woman or child is owned by another human being.
- They become the property of the slave owner by birth, kidnap or purchase.
- Enslaved people have no freedom or personal rights to travel, get married, go to school, vote, or follow their own religion.

Tyne and Wear Museums, *Remembering Slavery*

WHAT IS SLAVERY?

slave, noun. One who is the property of, and entirely subject to, another person, whether by capture, purchase, or birth; a servant completely divested of freedom and personal rights.

British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, *Breaking the Chains*

What is slavery?

A slave is someone who is owned and controlled by an employer who forces them to work for little or no pay using violence and threats. They are treated as property, not as people, and their freedom is limited.

Wilberforce House Museum

The subject of 'slavery' is, in this way, introduced as a topic which can be examined and defined: a knowable concept. This form of representation serves to remove visitors from questions of complicity in the transatlantic slave trade: how a society could enable the enslavement of others. This distancing of responsibility also occurs within exhibition texts where there appears no perpetrator: 'slavery' is cast as an agent itself. In effect, these exhibitions highlight the battle against an abstract noun; the involvement in the transatlantic slave trade of individuals, communities and societies in Britain is negated. Whilst explanations might be offered as to what constitutes the process of enslavement, this is qualified by placing the transatlantic slave trade within a third-person perspective and utilizing a wider historical narrative. For example:

Slavery has a long history and it continues in a variety of forms to this day. The dominance of one group over another has always been marked by enslavement - traffic in human beings has been a feature of every era in history.

Leicester Record Office, *The Long Road to Freedom*

Slavery has been a part of human societies in most places at some point in their histories. As recently as two hundred years ago it was normal for most people.

Hackney Museum, *Abolition '07*

The histories of other nations and past societies who also participated in enslavement are also drawn upon within exhibitions and displays. Britain's specific role is thereby absent in this interpretation, as the involvement in the slave trade is shared with others:

The practice of slavery goes back to ancient times. In ancient Egypt, slave labour was used to build temples and pyramids. The Greeks and the Romans also used enslaved labour in their homes and in the fields drawn from their conquered lands.

Tyne and Wear Museums, *Remembering Slavery*

The Portuguese were the first to enslave Africans to work on the plantations.

Epping Forest Museum, *The Longest Journey*

The transatlantic slave trade began in the early 16th Century. Europeans had started to settle in the Americas and began enslaving Africans to work on their plantations.

Bewdley Museum, *Cargoes*

Whilst the use of slavery by British citizens is neutralized and distanced at specific points in exhibitions, at particular moments a concerted emotional and imaginative engagement is required from the visitor. This is almost exclusively confined to the representations of the Middle Passage and the accounts of separation and loss. Visitors are reminded specifically of the horrific conditions of the forced transportation across the Atlantic:

At least 12 million Africans were loaded onto slave ships from the West African coast. Death rates could run between 10% and 20% on board. Enslaved Africans were crowded below deck, often for several weeks before the voyage began.

Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, *Equiano Exhibition*

Conditions on board slave ships were appalling: huge numbers of people were crammed into very small spaces, with little room to move or air to breathe.

National Maritime Museum, *Atlantic Worlds*

Enslaved Africans saw their families torn apart. Parents were helpless to prevent their children being sold to a new owner miles away. Mothers had to live with the knowledge that their children would be born into slavery.

British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, *Breaking the Chains*

This pricking of the emotions at these specific junctures in-fact mirrors the original eighteenth century abolition campaign itself, with its heavy reliance on emotive content and sentimentality to carry the message of abolitionism (Wood 2002). Through this mode of representation the role of the abolitionist is reaffirmed for visitors. The visitor is invited to assume the character of the abolitionist, as evidence of the slave trade is presented and discussed. This process is completed in the final texts of exhibitions and displays in museums, where attention is drawn to the ongoing problem of slavery in the modern world:

Although slavery in the form people knew it in 1807 no longer exists, exploitation or what some people have called "Modern Slavery" is still happening today.

Yate and District Heritage Centre, *Impact*

It is estimated that 12.3 million people across the world are enslaved today.

Tyne and Wear Museum, *Remembering Slavery*

Enslavement still exists throughout the world, including in Britain and Africa. Human trafficking is the second largest illegal activity after the drugs trade.

British Museum, *Inhuman Traffic*

This focus on the continuing impact of slavery around the world is significant as it reveals the particular 'ethical' stance through which many museums positioned visitors. By guiding individuals through the history of enslavement and abolition, then revealing the effects of contemporary slavery, the visitor takes on the guise of the 'abolitionist'. In this manner, evidence is presented and questions asked of the visitor as to their moral and ethical stance. This process can be termed an 'exercise of ethics', a specific technology of the self which is conducted by the visitor through the museum to reassure and reaffirm particular cultural values. This process is made explicit within sections of exhibitions and displays that discuss both the Middle Passage and contemporary slavery. Visitors are asked to reflect on their feelings regarding separation and dislocation from family and home as well as how they would respond to campaigns today:

What would you take with you?

Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth, *Chasing Freedom*

What would you miss the most?

London Print Studio, *The print that changed the world?*

What would you do to defend your rights?

Wilberforce House Museum

This process is reiterated within the spatial arrangement of exhibitions and displays, which also serve to communicate the 'abolitionist vision'. Space, in the majority of exhibitions is arranged overwhelmingly in a chronological fashion. Displays move the visitor from the origins of this history to the legacy and the present day. Certainly such a structure provides a certain sense of catharsis, allowing individuals to emerge from the exhibition with a sense of victory and achievement regarding the fight to end the slave trade and slavery (after Lennon and Foley 1999). However, it also enables the visitor to be informed, before questioning their attitudes or opinions regarding contemporary issues. The spatial arrangement of exhibitions provides visitors with specific viewpoints on the past. As the visitor walks through the exhibition and information is relayed in a particular order, the visitor assumes a perspective on the past. In this way the 'gaze' of the viewer becomes the significant feature of the analysis of space (Foucault 1980: 80). Examining the exhibitions and displays reveals a common spatial form for relaying the history of enslavement and abolition based upon a chronological framework. Therefore, the

enslavement of Africans is displayed to visitors; they witness African societies before the advent of transatlantic slavery, the brutality of the middle passage, the plantation system, the taste for commodities that drove the trade and the campaign that brought its end. The spatial arrangement of exhibitions therefore casts the viewer in the role of a 'witness'; they observe and acknowledge the crime and ultimately in some exhibitions, they are asked to testify against modern forms of enslavement or intolerance in the present. This in effect creates the visitor in the image of the 'abolitionist'. These exhibitions, through textual and spatial forms, affirm the 'abolitionist vision'. Visitor experiences are constructed in the guise of a principled, ethically-minded abolitionism, without the morally-comprising associations of connivance and responsibility. Museums marking the bicentenary in this way affirmed the myopic history of abolitionism, rather than challenging the ingrained perceptions of the past.

This was reinforced through what was a remarkable feature of the museum representation of enslavement and abolition in 2007: its homogeneity. Whether local, regional or national, museums across Britain responded to the bicentenary with generally comparable exhibitions. Though some institutions took to emphasising local figures or specific connections the result was largely the same. Indeed, the main themes of the majority of exhibitions can be summarised in the following headings:

- African art and culture
- The Triangle Trade
- Local connections
- Eighteenth century Britain
- Abolition and Resistance
- Modern day slavery

The cause of this standardisation can be located in the concern present across the museum sector, to uphold an eclipsed past and to emphasize a 'shared history'. However, this emphasis on a collective history avoided the trauma of the past and the present to validate the dominant perceptions of abolitionism. Hein (2000) has described how this tendency towards similarity impacts upon museums which seek to promote 'shared' or 'collective' visions.

'Even as we stand side by side, simultaneously undergoing our separate experiences shaped by a museum environment, we are prompted to carry away the judgement of a same and publicly acknowledged reality' (Hein 2000: 80).

In effect, this process undermines the very goals it sets out to achieve. Reiterating common principles serves not to consider the past but to defer judgement through the acceptance of particular values. However, this vision of the past was not wholly dominant throughout 2007; instances of institutions providing alternative histories which challenged the dominance of the abolitionist vision were numerous.

Integrating alternative histories

Representing history with alternative voices incorporates a diverse array of museum practices; whether creating an exhibition through and with community responses, handing over part of the exhibition space to community representatives or external consultants, or working with individuals from outside the museum to create exhibitions and displays. Through textual displays, alternative narratives were voiced within museums regarding the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. A number of exhibitions included the views of their community consultation panels into their exhibition. These comments were placed with the main text, commentating upon the subject and drawing out personal, family or cultural connections. In the exhibition, *Bombay Africans* at the Royal Geographical Society, London, the comments from the, Tanzanian Women's Association, Friends of Maasai People, Congolese Community in the UK, Lancaster Youth Group, Ghanaian Elders Group and O-Bay Community Trust, were placed with the main text. The comments made focused on connections and cultural continuity:

Our children do not see these items and it is important for them to know about their history.

It is a shame that not many people know about this story... I never heard or knew that Africans lived in India and I like to follow up the story of those who stayed and what their thinking is...how much of their original African culture has remained...

How do you define yourself? As Indian, African, Goans...this brings to the surface another point that globalisation started way back. This makes us world citizens!

What is significant here is that the history and legacy are presented as a real, lived experience, not as a dispassionate, objective account. The Walsall Museum exhibition, *Trade Links*, also engaged with this mode of representation, as members of the local African and African Caribbean communities described their experiences of the legacy of the British trade in enslaved Africans in their own lives:

It's an everyday experience and manifests in different ways. It can get you down, knock your confidence, and bring self doubt. Sometimes it's blatant and obvious, sometimes subtle and people don't even know they are being racist. It still hits the same way.

Tracing your family tree can be a rewarding process, and programmes like 'Who do you think you are?' have proved to be very popular. But if your skin is Black, you will have to dig deeper to find traces of your family. History has been rewritten, excluded or destroyed. So where do the blood lines begin?'

It also considered perspective of local self-identified 'white British' residents with regard to racism and discrimination:

White society enjoys Black music and dance, loves to eat Caribbean and African food, cheers when races and matches are won by Black sports men and women, and yet white society continues to perpetuate racist attitudes...

The application of first person perspectives, of history being a lived process which is experienced by individuals in the present, is also well-represented in the exhibition, *Voices from Africa* at the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow. The exhibition states how members of Glasgow's African and African Caribbean communities used objects from the museum's collections, 'to explore some of the identities that have shaped Africa and Scotland.' One panel exclaims:

We don't know how some objects arrived here from their original source. But we do know that our people were inhumanely treated during the brutal era...

The use of alternative voices in this manner allows museum to alter the way in which visitors consider how the past effects, impacts and shapes the present. Opening up exhibitions and displays presents the museum as a space which acknowledges and validates histories, memories, opinions and perspectives which might otherwise be subsumed or overlooked within dominant hegemonic structures. The museum as a symbol, as the repository of a nation's history and knowledge, provides alternative voices with a forum where they can be heard. Incorporating alternative histories also allows a greater sense of dialogue within society. Visitors who have not previously considered how the past impacts upon the present or do not associate with this history are given powerful, personal perspectives which enable them to access and acknowledge how this traumatic history has an equally traumatic legacy.

However, the location of these perspectives on the periphery of the exhibition, as commentators or respondents, rather than central features of the display, could ensure the amelioration of their effect. This distancing can be further evidenced in the various locations within the museum that these community histories are placed. The examination of the 'spatial

techniques' in museums to incorporate, manage and utilize these histories reveals three dominant forms of spatial practice which can be highlighted (after Sandall 2005). These are:

- Counterbalance
- Validate
- Pluralist

The use of space in the practice that has been termed 'counterbalance' was extremely prominent in museums in 2007. This form of representation, highlighted above, used community contributions and observations alongside a pre-existing display or collection as a response to highlight the history and legacy of Britain's role in the transatlantic slave trade. Such spatial techniques within the museum can, however, be viewed by communities as reactive responses to criticisms or requirements from funding bodies, rather than earnest and sincere, and thereby ultimately tokenistic. This is also of concern with the spatial technique termed here as 'validate', which represents the small-scale and accompanying sections from communities and consultative groups that were supplementary to permanent displays, which were placed in museums in 2007. This spatial form can be recognised in several local and national museums in Britain in 2007. The importance and value of these sections can be diluted however, as the impression of their adjunct nature combined with their peripheral location serves to lessen the impact and message. The final spatial technique considered here has been termed 'pluralist'. This use of space attempts to place alternative histories at the core of the exhibition and refute dominant perceptions. In many circumstances these exhibitions possess a core, central place within a museum, incorporate a variety of perspectives, involve external partnerships with communities and require a significant amount of institutional change. Perhaps the best known example of this work in 2007 was the *London, Sugar and Slavery* exhibition at the Museum in Docklands. In this permanent exhibition, significant community consultation resulted in an exhibition which addresses concerns of colonialism, capitalism, racism and multiculturalism and places them forefront within the exhibition space.

Expertise and knowledge

The limited degree that alternative narratives and histories were able to inform and shape the marking of the bicentenary within museums is attributable to the nature and value of 'expertise' within the institution (after Abbott 1988: 2). As Foucault (1991) observed, the notion of expert knowledge and expertise is vital to maintaining the structures of governmentality. Expert and specialist positions possess a social value which legitimate the formation of structures and systems through which citizens can be managed and controlled. The notion of 'expertise', enshrined and monopolised within the practice of the museum, was a significant aspect of the marking of 1807-2007. This was validated through the very structure of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). It was the HLF who, supported by the Government, made available significant funds for museums and the wider heritage sector to mark the bicentenary of the 1807 abolition act. Their key policy document, *Remembering Slavery in 2007*, set out the criteria by which successful applications for funding could be made (HLF 2007). This indicates a recommendation that heritage institutions and community-based organisations should work in partnership to mark the bicentenary (HLF 2007: 6). Whilst community-based organisations could apply for funding themselves, it was strongly recommended that the involvement of museums or other heritage institutions should be secured by communities because of their knowledge and proficiency (HLF 2007: 14). The opportunity for communities to shape and tell their own histories, from their own perspective was thereby limited. The extent to which this prevented alternative histories of enslavement and abolition emerging must be considered. In this way the presumed 'expertise' of the museum was a barrier in developing subaltern and dissonant histories regarding the bicentenary from being heard. With only a restricted means of challenging the dominant narrative regarding 1807-2007 the 'abolitionist vision' was pre-eminent within exhibitions and displays. This leaves a peculiar absence in the understanding and perception of this history and legacy. As Bennett (1995) remarked this position is not unknown amongst institutions:

Few museums draw attention to the assumptions which have informed their choice of what to preserve or the principles which govern the organisation of their exhibition. Few visitors have the time or inclination to look beyond what museums show them to ponder the significance of *how* they should show what they show (Bennett 1995: 126).

Alternative histories and voices were thereby 'managed' within exhibitions and displays in 2007, neutralising and in effect normalising them into the wider programme of the marking of the bicentenary in museums. Where dissonance and difference of opinion was represented, through a series of tactics and techniques it was effectively *brought* into 'the museum', rather than disrupting, challenging or reworking the 'abolitionist vision'. The laudable desire to emphasize a 'shared history' thereby prevented a confrontation with the trauma of the past. The barrier to this engagement is the notion of representation through 'expert' opinion, as it is assumed and accepted at an institutional and public level that specialists or professionals have the ability to shape and form representations. It is only through notions of 'expertise' that the dominant narrative of the past and present is validated within the museum. The acknowledgement of alternative sources of knowledge is required, that community responses form an equally legitimate source of knowledge for practice and policy. In this fashion the function of the practitioner is shared by the wider society (after Gramsci 1999: 304). This knowledge disrupts the work of governmentality and decontextualises 'expert' and 'specialist' knowledge as it signifies issues of agency, lived experience, conscientiousness and significance over formalisation, providing a system of democracy within the museum space (after Latour 2005: 16).

Conclusions

The museum response to the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade can be regarded as evidence of both the problems and the potentials of wider museum representation. The location of museums as spaces where dominant cultural values are asserted and affirmed added an extra level of complexity to the marking of the bicentenary through exhibitions and galleries. The standardisation of much of the museum output for 2007 represents a specific cultural response to 'managing' the violent history and present-day repercussions of Britain's involvement in the enslavement and brutalisation of millions of individuals from Africa. The identification of the 'abolitionist vision' within museums, of desensitising the past, removing difficulties of 'guilt' and 'responsibility', whilst maintaining a principled and ethical perspective, can be regarded as a means of deferring a confrontation with a traumatic past. Whilst many museums engaged in ways to emphasise a 'shared history', by revealing, remembering and recovering 'forgotten' or 'obscured' histories, this act simultaneously and ironically resulted in repressing the past. The ability of alternative histories and narratives to disrupt this dominant vision of the past and present was prevented by the structure of institutions and the ingrained value of 'expert' over 'lay' knowledge. The acknowledgement of the value and significance of knowledge from outside the museum structure provides a means of challenging dominant narratives and representing alternative histories. The study of governmentality, with regard to museums in 2007, offers a means of assessing how dominant accounts of the past were reproduced and dissonant voices incorporated and nominalised. Significantly, however, it also highlights a means by which the prevailing perceptions of this history and legacy are challenged. The ability to represent but not suppress relies on the recognition that knowledge and expertise arises from beyond the scenes at the museum.

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