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Examining interwoven narratives: multidirectional memory between enslaved labourers and mill workers in Northern England heritage sites

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ABSTRACT
This article examines two heritage site case studies that juxtapose historical British mill workers with enslaved labourers working on cotton plantations in the Americas, thus creating what Michael Rothberg has termed 'multidirectional memory'. Through close analysis of the People's History Museum in Manchester and Cromford Mills in Derbyshire, the article engages with the difficult issue of guilt, the role of community co-production and the potential power of such displays to disrupt division and promote solidarity, while acknowledging challenges involved.

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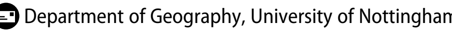
Introduction

This article utilises two different heritage site case studies in the North of England to investigate and evaluate narratives of multidirectional memory between enslaved labourers and mill workers. While it analyses English case studies, transatlantic slavery interpretation is a priority for heritage sites internationally, and the considerations explored have broader thematic resonance. Furthermore, historic cotton mills are not unique to northern England, and this article should be of particular interest to those working at such sites in New England and similar regions of industrialisation. In such cases, readers should consider whether evoking multidirectional memory may be a useful tool in their interpretation on transatlantic slavery and how they may navigate its complexities.

While they are located just fifty miles apart, the two case studies offer different heritage experiences and viewpoints on Britain's cotton industry. The first is the People's History Museum, which is a social history museum in the cosmopolitan city centre of Manchester. The second is Cromford Mills, in Derbyshire, which offers a rural industrial mill site within the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site. Historically, Cromford Mills opened in 1771, while Manchester came to dominate the cotton industry in the nineteenth century, but both relied on raw cotton. The commonality of particular interest for this article is that in their visitor spaces both juxtapose British mill workers with enslaved labourers working on cotton plantations in the Americas, thus creating multidirectional memory. This article highlights this practice and builds from this observation to explore its potential and challenges. The specific displays analysed were in place, as described, in June 2023. It should be noted, however, that they were both installed prior to 2020, when widespread public interest in transatlantic slavery memory in Britain followed the removal of a statue of the enslaver Edward Colston by Black Lives Matter protestors.

CONTACT Sophie Campbell sophie.campbell1@nottingham.ac.uk  Department of Geography, University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

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The analysis in this article interweaves multiple concerns within heritage and memory studies, specifically around the commemoration of transatlantic slavery. The following section begins by introducing relevant concepts, history and scholarship, including offering the terminology of 'enslavement-associated commerce'. Subsequently, two specific elements are drawn from the separate case studies: firstly, the question of guilt, both for contemporary visitors and historical agents, at the People's History Museum, and secondly, the role of community co-production at Cromford Mills and the impact of wider curatorial choices. It is argued that for multidirectional narratives guilt is an unhelpful concept which also feeds into narratives of victimisation of the enslaved, while interconnected contribution can instead be promoted. From these individual analyses, the sites are considered together in discussion of the powerful potential of such multidirectional narratives – in that they can disrupt division and promote solidarity – while acknowledging associated challenges. The article closes with a brief conclusion that looks to future displays.

Enslavement-associated commerce, multidirectional memory & absence

This section situates the analysis within a wider historical and conceptual framework. It introduces methodology, key history – including 'enslavement-associated commerce' (EAC) – and the core concept of multidirectional memory, which is utilised to challenge absence. This article draws on my doctoral research (Campbell 2022) in which close intra site analysis is developed through inter site comparative analysis, broadly following what Mary-Catherine Garden described as 'heritagescape as method' (Garden 2006, 398). My primary interest is what visitors will encounter within the space, and their possible interpretations. This close exhibit analysis facilitates exploration of the key issues of navigating guilt, co-production and solidarity to evaluate multidirectional memory as an interpretive tool.

The cotton industry in Britain is a key example of what I frame as 'enslavement-associated commerce' (Campbell 2023, 38). Involvement in EAC was far more expansive than the numbers of those who engaged in the trade in enslaved people or plantation ownership, and not all who were involved profited. The lens of EAC supports the argument that transatlantic slavery is 'everyone's history' (Donington et al. 2016, 2). The key historical link for this article is that British cotton mills relied on raw cotton cultivated by enslaved African labourers on cotton plantations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Joseph Inikori argues, the British cotton industry relied 'almost totally on African peoples in the Americas' (Inikori 2002, 77). More specifically, Sheryllynne Haggerty has outlined how in the late eighteenth century, raw cotton was supplied from the Levant, the West Indies and increasingly Brazil (Haggerty 2019, 946). By 1815 roughly half of raw cotton imports into Britain were coming from the USA, and between 1835 and 1860 approximately 80% of raw cotton came from the USA, and specifically the American South (Mitchell and Deane 1962, 180–181).

The British trade in enslaved African people was abolished in 1807. In 2007, this bicentenary was widely marked across Britain and generated academic commentary (Smith et al. 2011), including widespread criticism of the focus on abolition. Slavery was later abolished in the British Caribbean with the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. However, enslaved labour continued in the American South until the American Civil War (1861–1865), and thus cotton narratives can disrupt celebratory abolitionist narratives. The cotton industry also offers a broader opportunity where the complex interconnections of EAC can be made not just visible, but also relevant, to heritage visitors.

Challenging absence is central to the work of commemorating transatlantic slavery. While there may be a 'relative absence' (Cubitt 2012, 161) of clear sites of memory of transatlantic slavery in Britain, compared to the Caribbean, Brazil or the American South, altering our lens of focus from sites of enslavement to sites of EAC disrupts the perception that there are 'scant traces' (Seaton 2001, 177). This speaks to wider literatures on absence and haunting, including Karen Till's work in which she notes that 'places of memory both remember pasts and encrypt unnamed, yet powerfully felt, absences' (Till 2005, 9). Across northern England visitors can still encounter former cotton

mills that focus on machinery and their inventors as the 'fathers' of the industrial revolution. Amongst this, workers experiences are often minimised, and the history of the raw cotton supply, and thus slavery, is largely absent. Alongside this article's case studies, another key site in the work of challenging this absence at British cotton mills is Quarry Bank Mill (built 1784), on the outskirts of Greater Manchester. Following work in recent years, this site dedicates considerable space to the mill's workforce, and acknowledges both raw cotton supply and that the mill owner, Samuel Greg, also owned sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Beyond museums, Manchester's history of interconnection to slavery through the cotton industry has also been highlighted by *The Guardian's* 'Cotton Capital' series (launched 2023). Collectively, these efforts disrupt what John Beech has termed as the 'maritimisation' (Beech 2001, 103) of slavery memory, by demonstrating its inland relevance, particularly to Manchester. Amongst this activity, this article focuses on two case studies which not only challenge the absence of cotton supply, but connectedly disrupt the absence of labourers, including enslaved labourers, within heritage narratives in Britain.

This article presents both case studies as examples of multidirectional memory and discusses the potential power of such displays. This key concept was coined by Michael Rothberg in his highly influential work *Multidirectional Memory* (Rothberg 2009), which draws together Holocaust memory and postcolonial studies. Rothberg promotes multidirectional memory as 'an ethical vision based on commitment to uncovering historical relatedness' (Rothberg 2009, 29). Multidirectional memory 'acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites' (Rothberg 2009, 11). Stef Craps has similarly written of 'cross-traumatic affiliation' (Craps 2013, 72–88) between different groups. However, the multidirectional interconnection highlighted in this article is not only a narrative about trauma, suffering and victimhood but also of considerable contribution to Britain's industrial revolution. Rothberg challenges the idea of a 'competitive memory – as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources' (Rothberg 2009, 3). While the idea of scarce resources is often visible in the heritage sector, multidirectional memory offers an alternative approach which not only facilitates the inclusion of multiple stories in the same space but also creates further narratives. This article does not argue that the experiences of enslavement and nineteenth century working-class conditions were the same but rather that they were interwoven. Complex interconnection between diverse histories is foundational to multidirectional memory, as it promotes the idea that they can co-exist without competition and to the benefit of multiple parties. Where their historical relatedness is drawn out, and labourers' absences are challenged, a new narrative of solidarity may form. Challenges with this are explored in the latter stages of this article.

Analysing multidirectional memory between mill workers and enslaved labourers, also builds upon the work of Alan Rice, who explores Black Atlantic memory, and the artist Lubaina Himid. In 2002, Himid displayed *Cotton.com*, which created an imagined conversation between mill workers and enslaved labourers. Rice explains that 'the site of memory Himid fixed on to galvanise her thinking was the memorial bronze statue to Abraham Lincoln by George Grey Bernard unveiled in Manchester in 1919' (Rice 2007, 296). The statue, and accompanying inscription, memorialises a moment during the American Civil War when several thousand workers adopted an 'An Address to Lincoln' – which supported the erasure of chattel slavery in the USA – and his reply, which acknowledged the sacrifices of the working people and praised their 'sublime Christian heroism' (Rice 2007, 298). While it should be recognised that the American Civil War received various responses in cotton towns in England, this was a 'transatlantic gesture of solidarity' (Rice 2007, 300). Rice concluded – in 2007 prior to Rothberg's publication – that Himid's work was 'an exemplary attempt to make such a radical, multidirectional politics work and theorise both race and class at one and the same time' by drawing together 'those who created Manchester's wealth' (Rice 2007, 301).

Following Rothberg's (2009) publication Rice has also referenced his phraseology. In discussion of multidirectional acknowledgement of the Civil War connection in Rochdale, also in the Northwest of England, Rice stressed that the interconnections 'exemplify a multidirectionality

that Michael Rothberg's seminal work shows as crucial for understanding the interconnectedness of histories of oppression' (Rice 2017, 175). Rice and Himid are also amongst the co-authors of the 2019 volume *Inside the Invisible* which explores Himid's artworks. Within this, the 'ongoing conversations between exploited workers and chattel slaves', depicted in *Cotton.com*, were framed as a 'monument to similarity and difference' (Bernier et al. 2019, 193). They are connected, but they are not the same. The co-authors also explicitly reference Rothberg and refer to his seminal work on *Multidirectional Memory* as a 'cogent theoretical tool for understanding the power of *Cotton.com*' (Bernier et al. 2019, 194). This article similarly deploys Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory as a tool for understanding the power of further heritage interventions that draw together enslaved labourers and mill workers.

On *Cotton.com* Himid explained that 'it's not about competing to say who had it worse, the working class British or the slaves. No, all of us are part of the same rip-off/forms of exploitation' (Quoted in Rice 2010, 89). Similarly, in a 2016 chapter on multidirectional memory in Glasgow, Michael Morris highlights that such work allows for an exploration of an 'Atlantic working class' rather than 'playing commoners off against the enslaved' (Morris 2016, 199). More widely this speaks to the idea of 'common bonds of pain' (Little 2019, 638). The narratives though are not just about exploitation or pain, but also contribution to the industrial revolution. Furthermore, unlike *Cotton.com*, the two case studies analysed in this article do not focus on the known solidarity during the American Civil War, but rather they offer wider multidirectional memory that alludes to the web of EAC, and the variety of interconnection.

The cotton story is distinctive within industries of EAC because an output of enslaved labour fed into a production industry, which engaged large numbers of workers in difficult conditions. As Morris comments, while sugar and tobacco were 'squandered through consumption' – which could be boycotted – the industrial production of cotton 'speaks more to networks of labour, exploitation and profit in the circulation of materials under a global capitalist system' (Morris 2018, 112). It is this global network that multidirectional interventions can draw out, and thus cotton history narratives are ripe for such multidirectionality.

The question of guilt

This section focuses on the question of guilt, stimulated by a curatorial choice within the first multidirectional case study: a display on the 'Industrial Revolution' at the People's History Museum (PHM), which juxtaposes mill workers and enslaved labourers. Through discussion of complexities with the issue of guilt, this section encourages against deliberately provoking guilt in visitors. This is substantially because, while this article does not undertake visitor studies it builds on recognition that transatlantic slavery history is difficult for heritage visitors, and that guilt is an issue, and emotion, that must be navigated. Reflecting on visitor responses to exhibits for the 2007 bicentenary, Laurajane Smith observed that 'most white British respondents tended to emotionally insulate or disengage themselves from the exhibitions, and more particularly from feelings of "guilt" and "shame", using a range of discursive strategies' (Smith 2010, 197). Against this understanding, deliberate provocation seems likely only to increase resistance.

The PHM is located within the city of Manchester, which boomed from cotton production during the nineteenth century, but the cotton industry receives little attention at this site. Instead, the narrative focuses on social history and democracy. Chris Burgess (2009) offers insight into the history of the PHM, which was born out of the National Museum of Labour History, and relocated from London in 1990. Burgess also notes the involvement of museums in the Northwest of England in the *Revealing Histories* project for the 2007 bicentenary (Burgess 2009, 33–34).

The 'Industrial Revolution' display continues this interest in transatlantic slavery, and situates enslaved labour alongside British mill workers in a juxtaposition that promotes multidirectional memory. The left-hand side of this display focuses on the enslaved in the Americas, while the right-hand side focuses on industrial workers in Britain. To reinforce this large text explains that

'Manchester grew rich on cotton from slave plantations'. Following community consultation in 2019, the PHM have installed 'Migration: a human story' interpretation at points around the museum. Consequently, in 2023, the pre-existing Industrial Revolution display had additional boards on Lascars (Indian seaman) and Irish Immigration. This introduces broader multidirectional memory within the display, though this new addition is not explored in depth here.

At the PHM, the multidirectional memory between labourers is most clearly visually deployed at the bottom of the 'Industrial Revolution' display where there is a large image of an enslaved person next to an image of mill machinery and workers, connected by a quote in large font. The image used to depict the enslaved shows a kneeling, chained individual which, as the label explains, was created for the campaign against slavery. This passive imagery has been problematised for perpetuating narratives of victimhood, wherein enslaved people were not agents in their own emancipation (Wood 2010). In the space between those two images, a large quotation reads: 'We are all guilty – we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others'. This evocation of guilt further contributes to a narrative of victims and perpetrators, though neither are clearly identified. Accompanying the quote is the attribution 'William Wilberforce 1789'. It is likely many British visitors will recognise Wilberforce as a famous abolitionist, but that knowledge does not explain who is guilty, or of what.

The interpretation of Wilberforce's quote, within the space, is ambiguous. Consequently, visitor interpretation will vary and reflect wider debates within key memory studies scholarship. Concerns of collective guilt, complicity and responsibility are grounded in responses to the Holocaust. Of particular interest here are Hannah Arendt's comments in 'Collective Responsibility' (Arendt 1968) on the phrase 'we are all guilty'. Arendt wrote that 'the cry "We are all guilty" that at first hearing sounded so very noble and tempting has actually only served to exculpate to a considerable degree those who actually were guilty. Where all are guilty, nobody is'. She also continued that the 'cry "We are all guilty" is actually a declaration of solidarity with the wrongdoers' (Arendt 1968, 135–143). From Arendt's perspective the PHM display spreads guilt so expansively that no one can bear guilt.

Building from Arendt, and wider scholars, Rothberg has contributed substantially to debates around collective guilt. He developed the concept of the 'implicated subject' to 'expand our "underdeveloped vocabulary" around privilege and injustice' (Rothberg 2019, 1). In 2013 he connected his work on multidirectionality with his emerging work on implicated subjects, which he argued would 'move us away from overt questions of guilt and innocence and leave us in a more complex and uncertain moral and ethical terrain' (Rothberg 2013, 40). This work reflects the complexity and the need to move from framings which perpetuate the idea of guilty perpetrators and innocent, passive victims.

To return to the display, the ambiguous quote can be seen as distributing guilt on various parties. One interpretation of the quote may be that historical subjects are guilty. Extraneous research – that most visitors will not undertake – reveals that the quote used comes from a speech delivered by Wilberforce to the House of Commons, who permitted 'this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority' (Wilberforce 1789, quoted in Carey 2003, 298–303). The historical context highlights that it was those in parliament he accused of being 'guilty', or at least deployed the rhetoric of guilt against. However, this is not clear within the displays. Without this context the historical specificity is lost, and the question of who is the 'we' that bears the guilt is left open-ended.

The only historical 'we' depicted within the space are the mill workers and the enslaved. Thus, it can be read as implying that workers bore guilt for the conditions of their contemporaries who were enslaved, or vice versa. Rothberg stresses that 'implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm' (Rothberg 2019, 1). The industrial cotton mills made the nation, and a few individuals, rich, but many of those who worked in them suffered to generate profits for others, with little or no choice, and therefore guilt is an unhelpful concept when considering historical workers. Consequently, this article refers to cotton mill workers as involved or interwoven with EAC, as most did not occupy a position of power, unlike implicated subjects.

The final interpretation may be that visitors are guilty, and the quote may encourage these feelings. However, evoking guilt does not explore the complexities of interconnection. Responding to Maya Angelou's 1994 statement that 'one should be sorry but never guilty for one's history', Jessica Moody reflects that 'shame is an expression of sorrow, an outward reach of human empathy perhaps, against guilt's inward cannibalistic processes' (Moody 2020, 167). Shame, rather than guilt, may be a more useful terminology. Rothberg also explores genealogical and structural implication in the legacies of slavery (Rothberg 2019, 59–86), and makes the nuanced argument that 'white subjects' are 'collectively responsible for the legacies of the past without being criminally guilty' (Rothberg 2019, 83). This article acknowledges the implicated position of contemporary visitors, and recognises shame, but does not encourage provoking guilt, which is distinguishably different, following Rothberg's argument. As Smith observes there is a requirement for the development of 'emotional tools to negotiate constructively issues of guilt and collective historical responsibility' (Smith 2010, 207). While multidirectional memory may be understood as one of these tools, and is deployed by the PHM, the curatorial choice to include Wilberforce's quote raises numerous difficult questions without offering visitors such tools.

Community co-production at a world heritage site

This section highlights how community co-production introduced multidirectional memory, between labourers, to the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site (DVMWHS), which has international status because of its role in the industrial revolution. Cromford Mills sits within the World Heritage Site and is owned and operated by the Arkwright Society. They conserve the mills and the memory of Sir Richard Arkwright, who invented the water frame spinning technology, and built the world's first successful water-powered cotton spinning mill at Cromford in 1771. Cromford Mills is a multipurpose site, but of particular interest to this article is the visitor centre that opened in 2016. This is the Gateway Visitor Centre for the whole DVMWHS and it thus offers a wider narrative of the valley, and the mill owners. Within the visitor centre, the displays of focus in this article were introduced through the Global Cotton Connections (GCC) project, which was a community-academic co-production collaboration. The name chosen for the project reflects the inherently international nature of the historical cotton industry. The group introduced a mural positioned beside a walkway, and developed a corner display consisting of large panels on 'Global Cotton Connections' and two maps detailing where raw cotton was supplied from. The Cromford Mills site has subsequently installed a CGI film titled 'When Arkwright met Strutt' [another Derwent Valley mill owner] that also features in the analysis of multidirectional memory within the space.

The GGC project at Cromford Mills reflects the broader discussions around 'whose heritage' is preserved and told, as Stuart Hall famously challenged (1999, in Ashley and Stone 2023). It is what Alan Rice terms an 'interventionist' site which is co-developed by community groups (Rice 2010, 16). In this, it is also an example of 'heritage from the bottom-up, challenging the official meaning of places and empowering the local and descendant community to take charge of their heritage development' which Paul A. Shackel encourages (Shackel 2013, 386). However, through placement, and the film, the multidirectionality is also expanded to encompass the mill owners, which may not reflect the wishes of the co-producers.

The Global Cotton Connections project is an early example of the ongoing collaborative relationship between Dr Susanne Seymour, from the University of Nottingham, and a community group brought together by the social enterprise, Bright Ideas Nottingham.[1] The latter was formerly known as the Slave Trade Legacies group, during the Cromford work, and is now known as the Legacy Makers. They were responsible for the slavery-focused elements of the displays created at Cromford Mills, and have worked on various projects around EAC since 2014, including a collaboration with visual anthropologist Shawn Sobers at a local historic house (Sobers 2020, 44–46). The Legacy Makers group have

continued their interest in cotton mills with a recent project focused on Darley Abbey in Derbyshire, which also sits within the DVMWHS. Members have also collaborated with local artist Rachel Carter on the ongoing creation of her sculpture *Standing in this Place*, which promotes multidirectional memory between the histories of enslaved women and the women who worked in cotton mills. From Cromford to Darley Abbey this community group has had a substantial impact on the narrative of the globally recognised DVMWHS, and warrants recognition.

This impact has received acknowledgement elsewhere. In their 2021 reflections on the 2007 bicentenary, John Oldfield and Mary Wills noted the GCC project as a key subsequent public history exploration (Oldfield and Wills 2021, 258). In his recent book *About England*, David Matless also draws brief attention to the GCC project. At Cromford he recognises that 'a site global in its significance has also been global in its interconnections, and recent scholarship and activism have sought to embed the site in global histories less celebratory' (Matless 2023, 252). This section provides a more in-depth consideration of the multidirectional memory the GCC project has introduced to the visitor centre.

At the site, within the 'Global Cotton Connections' panels, large text begins by explaining that: 'Nottingham Slave Trade Legacies and Sheffield South Asian groups have worked to uncover the roles of the British Empire and the slave trade in creating wealth in the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site. The groups have used historical evidence to identify and acknowledge the parts that their ancestors played in building Britain's cotton textile industry'. Within the centre of this display is 'Ancestors' Voices', from the Nottingham Slave Trade Legacies group, that outlines the contribution of enslaved Africans. To the right is 'Spinning a Yarn, Weaving a Story' which was created by Sheffield South Asian Groups. While the focus of this article is multidirectional memory between the enslaved and mill workers, this element of the display does not include mill workers.

The 'Spinning a Yarn, Weaving a Story' panel explains that 'before the first mill opened at Cromford, India was the world's leading cotton cloth producer'. Smaller text continues to elaborate that 'British colonial expansion brought India's high quality and vibrant cotton fabrics to the British market and they were key items in the transatlantic slave trade. Later colonial trade policies protected the growing British cotton industry, contributing to a decline in spinning and weaving in India'. The work of Giorgio Riello (2013) illuminates a wider non-Eurocentric history of cotton, including the importance of Indian cottons. This third interwoven narrative is not a focus of this article, but its inclusion demonstrates how multidirectional memory is not just bilateral but can be more expansive. It is also worth noting that Cromford Mills explored these connections further through a temporary art installation from Hetain Patel, titled *Cotton Labour*, in summer 2022.

The maps that complete the corner display draw on specific historical data of the Strutt family's raw cotton purchases, in the periods of 1794–1803 and 1804–1817, and show that the majority was coming from South America where enslaved labour was also used. Cromford Mills was established by Richard Arkwright, in partnership with Jedediah Strutt, but this information dates from after Strutt's involvement at Cromford Mills, and this cotton was used elsewhere in the Derwent Valley. The data is taken from Fitton and Wadsworth (1958, 264–267), which is cited within the display itself. Seymour et al. also offer further details into the research which the maps visualise, to provide 'evidence of deep connections between the Atlantic slave economy and the growth of cotton spinning in the Derwent Valley' (Seymour et al. 2015, 165). Through this the maps capture the historical foundation for the multidirectional memory between mill workers and enslaved labourers, which were interwoven through the supply of raw cotton to the mills.

The third section of the GCC intervention, which is of particular interest, is a large mural – illustrated by Brian Gallagher – which symbolises centuries of interconnection, rather than a moment of solidarity. The black and white mural depicts enslaved cotton pickers, local mill workers and Indian weavers, and is the clearest visual display of multidirectional memory. Accompanying text reinforces that the piece 'brings together workers from different parts of the world whose labours helped establish the cotton textile industry', and highlights their

contribution within the space. Clare Dalton, who participated in the Visitor Centre design, offers a brief article on the creation of this work which reveals the careful consideration of the depiction of the labourers from the co-producers (Dalton 2017, 14). This reveals the effort that was taken over the imagery so that they created not just multidirectionality of suffering and exploitation, but also of resistance, perseverance and contribution. In contrast, the PHM used a historical depiction of a kneeling enslaved person creating a multidirectional narrative of victimhood.

Co-production creates end products, while much of the decision-making processes risk being lost to visitors. To counter this, the GCC display incorporates audio recordings that offer some insight into why the history was included: to recognise historical contribution, to feature unheard voices and wider perspectives, and to do reparative history. When functional, these recordings frame the intervention for attentive visitors as reparative for diaspora communities who can demonstrate their own interconnected contributions. Additionally, as Seymour et al. argue, 'without a global perspective understanding of such sites is diminished, partial and in danger of alienating the global publics a World Heritage Site seeks to engage' (Seymour et al. 2015, 166). They also make it explicit that the project was designed to 'address a gap in both historical understanding and public communication of the global connections of rural cotton textile production in Derbyshire' (Seymour et al. 2015, 151).

While such sources provide context for the global stories, the more curious inclusion within the mural becomes the local mill workers. Whereas at the PHM workers are a prevalent focus, at Cromford Mills the workers did not provide an easy access point of attachment for wider narratives within prior interpretation. Rather, the site had little on workers' experiences and focused predominantly on Richard Arkwright and other prominent Derbyshire mill-owning families. Therefore, the mural suggests that, during the project, the local historical people the co-producers chose to connect their histories to, were the mill workers, who had also previously been largely absent.

Curatorial choices, however, also draw the mill owners into the multidirectional memory. Dalton highlights how the collaborators moved from the idea of adding a portrait of a Black individual, alongside that of the mill owners, to the mural of labourers (Dalton 2017, 14). This choice separated the groups from those who profited from their labour. However, the mural was designed to 'occupy a prominent place within the Gateway site and be visible to anyone who entered' (Dalton 2017, 14). In practice, it has been situated alongside a walkaway between two spaces, the first of which houses portraits of mill owners while the second hosts the other elements of the GCC intervention, and 'The Arkwright Experience'. Furthermore, the mural is obscured by a translucent glass wall, which celebrates 'key players' including the cotton entrepreneurs Richard Arkwright and Jedediah Strutt. Consequently, these 'great white men' partially conceal the narratives of the labourers, while the labourers have a haunting presence as the glass is translucent rather than opaque. While the collaborators moved away from another portrait, the placement of the mural next to and behind mill owners creates a multidirectional connection to them.

To close this section, the focus is the CGI film titled 'When Arkwright met Strutt', which was added by Cromford Mills in 2022 and can be viewed after having purchased a tour ticket. The protagonists of the piece are Richard Arkwright, Jedediah Strutt and two local workers, who are all depicted by actors. Within the film the subject of unpaid enslaved labour disrupts their conversations following the appearance of a painting of a plantation. Their story ends with the workers stating that mill labourers should be 'up there' too, for their contribution, and with them stepping into a portrait frame to be hung alongside Arkwright, Strutt and an image of a plantation. While some may feel that greater emphasis should be placed on the mill owners' profits from EAC, or question why enslaved labourers have no voice of their own, this film ties together the work offered by the GGC project and the wider predominant focus on mill owners at the site. In this film the multidirectional memory is not just between the workers but also with the mill owners, and all are positioned as contributing to the Derwent Valley. It is contribution, rather than guilt and victimhood, that is central to this narrative.

The potential power and challenges

This article focuses on examples of multidirectional memory between mill workers and enslaved labourers. This section argues that these case studies have powerful potential, as the multidirectionality directly challenges long standing competition from Britain's white working classes with enslaved labourers, and competitive memory between their descendants. Rather than ongoing competitive memory, the case studies offer a different narrative of overlap, interconnection and solidarity. This creation of a new narrative is central to multidirectional memory. As Rothberg writes, 'pursuing memory's multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others' (Rothberg 2009, 5). As Matless comments, these displays represent 'a system whereby wealth is generated from labour relations which in turn make labourers conscious of themselves as a class. The world reorganizes' (Matless 2023, 252). However, this reorganisation faces challenges, which this section explores.

As noted, the case studies considered here do not explicitly reflect a moment of known solidarity, but rather they offer wider multidirectional memory, and thus are potentially more ambiguous to visitors as to why they offer this juxtaposition. They may be interpreted as symbolising the historical interwoven human web of EAC, where the people, rather than the produce, are the focus. Alternatively, visitors may perceive that these displays have been created for a contemporary purpose. As Graham et al. summarised, that 'heritage is that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes' (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000, 17). While the nature of that purpose is not explicit within the displays this section explores the consideration that they may have been designed to promote solidarity and navigate division.

Resistance to heritage narratives of transatlantic slavery, explored in work such as Rose's US-focused text on *Interpreting Difficult History* (Rose 2016), is an internationally recognised concern. In the UK visitors distancing from slavery, and believing it largely irrelevant, has been observed previously. Smith found, with 2007 bicentenary exhibits, that 'issues of class' were used to 'achieve distancing', wherein working-class respondents identified the aristocracy as beneficiaries (Smith 2010, 206). Similarly, Donington et al. argue that 'falling back on hierarchies of suffering [. . .] some have responded to the idea that the nation benefited from slavery by insisting that their families were "ordinary" and therefore free from the taint of British involvement' (Donington et al. 2016, 1). With increased attention, and vocal backlash, in 2020, these arguments were widespread. Against this, inevitably some potential visitors will view these displays as contentious and unwelcome.

However, these multidirectional displays have potential to reveal relevance and interconnection, and to aid in navigating the observed distancing and division. The curatorial choice to present multidirectional memory can reasonably be interpreted as a desire to encourage contemporary commonality and solidarity over division. The case studies can therefore be seen as examples of what Rose calls 'difficult history interpretations' which 'serve as tools for improving lives and society' (Rose 2016, 62). These displays can be situated within a belief system that 'opening the English past might shape an open English future' (Matless 2023, 71) where multidirectional interconnection provides a collective foundation. Their narrative offers a challenge to the 'competitive memory games in which the exploitation of enslaved Africans or textile workers is used as a tool against solidarity' (Bernier et al. 2019, 194). However, that solidarity is not easy, nor is overcoming the long-established competition.

This historical competition was grounded in a perceived zero-sum struggle over scarce political attention – to rephrase Rothberg's work – that can be seen clearly at the time of abolition. Taylor recounts how the anti-slavery movement in Britain drew 'fire from Radical activists' for focusing on enslaved Africans rather than factory children (Taylor 2020, 244). Scanlan similarly observes that 'working-class reformers began to see justice as a zero-sum game, where anything enslaved people won became something that white workers lost' (Scanlan 2020, 250). Campaigners also deliberately evoked competitive language. In his 1830 letter – 'Yorkshire Slavery' – Richard Oastler argued that

mill workers existed 'in a state of slavery, more horrid than are the victims of that hellish system "colonial slavery"' (Oastler 1830, quoted in Hargreaves 2012, 9–11). Chartist Bronterre O'Brien, in 1833 – in response to compensation for plantation owners being paid from tax revenue – protested to emancipation being granted 'at the expense of those who are greater slaves than themselves' (O'Brien 1833, quoted in Hanley 2016, 122). In 1833, both the Slavery Abolition Act and one of several Factories Act passed. Nevertheless, this long standing competitive perceived zero-sum game was firmly established and continues to haunt public memory.

Rothberg acknowledges that 'memory competition does exist and sometimes overrides other possibilities for thinking about the relation between different histories' (Rothberg 2009, 10). In a 2021 chapter, Corinne Fowler dedicates space to reviewing responses to her recent work on highlighting colonial histories. Within this, Fowler notes that one 'common objection to talking about slavery connections in the heritage sector centres on parallels between white working-class oppression and chattel slavery' (Fowler 2021, 243). Fowler describes a perceived 'hierarchy of important historical topics' (Fowler 2021, 244), and illuminates that when it is deployed as an objection, comparisons between white workers and enslaved labourers continue to be used as competitive memory. It is this context, building from historical origins, that creates the challenge for, and potential power of, the efforts to promote solidarity, which is central to the desired impact of multidirectional memory.

Rothberg encourages 'visions that construct solidarity out of the specificities, overlaps, and echoes of different historical experiences' (Rothberg 2009, 16). In the case studies of this article, multidirectional memory promotes solidarity between groups that have inherited division across centuries. Both sites promote multidirectional memory between the enslaved and mill workers, while the work by the GCC project at Cromford Mills also draws in Indian weavers. The concept of solidarity between different oppressed labourers, around the globe, has been familiar since the development of Marxism in the nineteenth century. David Featherstone notes that 'solidarity is a central practice of the political left' (Featherstone 2012, 5), in his work on international solidarity which notably begins with the example British cotton mill workers during the American Civil War (Featherstone 2012, 1–4). Yet, in criticising capitalist exploitation and promoting labour solidarity, within our understandings of political dichotomy, the multidirectional interventions can be seen as politically radical. The PHM has socialist roots and situates their display on slavery within a section on revolution. Within their frame, the visual juxtaposition of white workers and enslaved Africans can be interpreted as promoting transnational socialism, or proletarian internationalism. The degree of radical intent of those responsible for the interventions in the Derwent Valley is not suggested by the framing however, and visitors will likely have varying views and reactions. Even where worker solidarity is viewed positively, it is also still not unchallenging. As David Roediger comments, sites can embrace solidarity while 'being uneasy about the assumptions it sometimes evokes' (Roediger 2016, 224). Solidarity is neither simple nor easy to achieve, and Rothberg himself acknowledges the 'risks of solidarity' of 'adventurism, misunderstanding, appropriation, and ideological rigidity' (Rothberg 2019, 203).

Core to the potential risk of promoting solidarity is that visitors may equate those presented, rather than respecting their differences and realising their interconnections. Fowler recognises that the histories of enslaved labourers and mill workers are 'intertwined' but argues that 'the parallel [. . .] is a false historical and legal analogy' (Fowler 2021, 243) and highlights differences between the forms of exploitation. This article does not claim they are the same. More broadly, multidirectional memory does not claim that all histories or memories are the same, rather it is about 'uncovering historical relatedness' (Rothberg 2009, 29), as epitomised by the naming of the 'Global Cotton Connections' project. However, visitors may interpret these juxtapositions as equating the histories. In these examples, they are drawn side by side so that the suffering of the enslaved can be dismissed under 'we all suffered', echoing the 'All Lives Matter' response to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. Furthermore, in the context of the PHM, issues of collective suffering collide with the statement that 'we are all guilty' to undermine attempts of solidarity further.

Meanwhile at Cromford Mills, multidirectional memory between labourers has been interwoven with stories of mill owners in the Derwent Valley, through the placement of the GGC materials and the new CGI film, thus disrupting worker solidarity. This extension moves the narrative from the idea of victims and perpetrators, for which guilt is central, towards an inclusive narrative of contribution. Within this, the profits made from EAC by the mill owners are not explicitly critiqued, and there remains the risk of visitors equating all contributions.

Conclusion

This article has examined narratives of multidirectional memory between enslaved labourers and mill workers, at two heritage case studies: The People's History Museum in Manchester and the DVMWHS Visitor Centre at Cromford Mills in rural Derbyshire. They have different focuses, audiences and issues to navigate, but both juxtapose mill workers with enslaved labourers and thus promote multidirectional memory. The analysis has drawn out observations and concerns that are thematically applicable to those engaging with these histories not just in northern England, but across all sites impacted by EAC.

As explored in the sections of close analysis, details within the interpretation can promote different multidirectional narratives of guilt or contribution. Future displays should move from a focus on guilt, as deployed at the PHM, and narratives of victimisation, to draw out complex narratives of contribution. The impact of placement on those narratives should also be carefully considered, as the community collaboration GGC project's worker solidarity has been expanded by wider curatorial choices. The above section has outlined further challenges, including whether competitive memory is too established to disrupt and the risk of visitors equating experiences rather than recognising specificities within solidarity. Nevertheless, multidirectional memory as an interpretive tool has powerful potential for navigating established divisions. More broadly, the multidirectional memory encouraged by the juxtapositions at Cromford Mills and the PHM reflects historical global networks and provides access to the complex narrative of EAC. In these case studies, the story of cotton mill workers highlights how involvement in EAC was widespread and its relevance far-reaching, thus challenging disengagement and resistance.

Given this potential, cotton industry heritage sites globally should consider utilising multidirectional memory, while being conscious of navigating the issues highlighted here and further nation-specific contexts. In Britain, the bicentenary of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, in 2033, will likely spur events as 2007 did. Notably neither of the case studies in this article stressed to visitors that Britain's cotton industry relied on enslaved labour in the American South for decades after abolition in the British Caribbean. When 2033 comes, the continuation of this cotton connection is vital to recognise, and multidirectional memory with mill workers should be utilised to engage with this, not least because of the recognised solidarity during the American Civil War.

Note

1. The author was not involved in the Global Cotton Connections project but has been supervised by Dr Susanne Seymour at the University of Nottingham. While submission of this article predates the collaboration, the author is also working with the Arkwright Society at Cromford Mills in 2024.

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