

## Guest Editorial : museums and the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade

Laurajane Smith\* Australian National University, Geoffrey Cubitt\*\* University of York,  
Emma Waterton\*\*\* University of Western Sydney

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This issue of *Museum & Society* reports on some of the findings of the *1807 Commemorated Project*. Four of the papers (by Cubitt, Wilson, Fouseki and Smith) are by members of the project team; the opening paper by Waterton, based on her own researches in a closely related field, provides an important context in which to view the museum activities that the project studied. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as a Knowledge Transfer Fellowship, the *1807 Commemorated Project* aimed to map and to promote reflection on the ways in which the Bicentenary of the 1807 Act of Parliament abolishing British participation in the slave trade was marked in museums in Britain. (It should be noted that the 1807 Act did not abolish slavery itself: the emancipation of those held as slaves in the British Caribbean would come only in the 1830s.) Hailed by the then Minister of Culture, David Lammy, as 'an opportunity to celebrate, educate and inform', the Bicentenary was interpreted by many in government and in the media as an occasion to celebrate the achievements of abolitionists like William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. This 'Wilberfestian' mood was challenged, however, by a range of commentators and community and political groups. The response to the Bicentenary of museums and galleries around Britain was to attempt to provide a holistic account of enslavement, resistance, abolition and the consequences of the slave trade for Africa, the Caribbean and Britain. This was perceived by many in the museum sector as a particularly important task in furthering social debate about the legacies of the trade, whose significance in British society is often regarded as a 'hidden' history (Oldfield 2007; Dresser 2009; Paton 2009).

The purpose of the *1807 Commemorated Project* aimed to analyse exhibitions dealing with slavery, abolition and related themes that opened in the Bicentenary year, and to examine their impact on visitors and their contribution towards shaping public awareness of the histories and contemporary legacies of slavery and abolition. The project, based at the University of York, and supported by the University's Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past and the Departments of Archaeology and History, was co-directed by Laurajane Smith and Geoffrey Cubitt who, with post-doctoral research assistants Ross Wilson and Kalliopi Fouseki, worked with seven partner museums during 2007-9. The official partner institutions of this project were the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol; the British Museum; the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool; the Museum of London Docklands; the National Maritime Museum; and Wilberforce House Museum, Hull.

The project team worked intensively with these institutions, conducting interviews with a variety of museum staff and community representatives involved in the planning process of exhibitions marking 1807. In addition, exit interviews with visitors to exhibitions during 2007 were undertaken at each of these museums as well as at Harewood House, Yorkshire, which had mounted a temporary exhibition to commemorate 1807. To gain a broader perspective, members of the project team also visited about fifty further exhibitions, compiling a detailed textual and visual record of many of these, and interviewing some of the staff involved. Less comprehensive information was gathered for about 120 additional exhibitions. The materials gathered constitute a substantial archive and database documenting the varieties of museum practice during the bicentenary, the experiences of practitioners, and the responses of visitors.

The results of the project team's work have been discussed and disseminated at a conference held in 2008 at the University of York and at sixteen workshops held during 2008-2009. Eight of these workshops were undertaken with staff from partner museums, and another eight with museum staff and community representatives from regional centres across England. Seven of these latter workshops were sponsored by the Museum, Libraries and Archives

Council (MLA). The work presented in the articles in this issue has benefited greatly from the input and feedback of workshop and conference participants. Findings from the project can be found on the project's web site *1807 Commemorated*.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a number of toolkits deriving from the project's work on exhibitions, community consultation, audience responses, and curatorial experiences can also be found on the MLA funded website.<sup>2</sup>

This issue of *Museum and Society* documents only some of the findings of this project. However, it adds to the growing post-2007 literature that has sought to analyse and comment on the Bicentenary and its impact on public debate (Hall 2007, 2010; Patton 2009; Wood 2010a, b). It also add to the commentaries that have examined museum responses to the event (Prior 2007; Tibbles 2008; Cubitt 2009; Kowaleski Wallace 2009; Rice 2009; Hamilton 2010; Lynch and Aberti 2010), and those that have engaged with the wider cultural sector and community response (Green 2008).

In their activity for 2007, museums addressed themselves to (in the senses both of speaking to and of speaking of, and sometimes imaginatively of speaking for) several different kinds or levels of 'community'. In most cases, the primary address was to the imagined community of the nation. The history presented in exhibitions – the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the transatlantic slave system more generally – was, of course, a transnational, intercontinental, even an embryonically globalizing history, as was made clear by maps and diagrams of the 'triangular trade' in museums up and down the country. This history was viewed, however, largely from the standpoint of a concern with Britain's involvement, and with what this involvement meant for understandings of British (or possibly English) national history and national identity, and for society and politics in Britain today. The slaving activities of other European powers were mentioned as part of the context for Britain's own involvement, but were dealt with in little detail; nor did museums engage in any sustained comparison of different national experiences or build more than superficial generalizations about the modalities of a more generally 'European' involvement. In short, it was a British public that was invited to reflect, on issues of responsibility, of complicity, of indebtedness, of legacy, that linked the history of enslavement to the character and destiny and current life experience of this particular national community. In this respect, museums participated in, and were exposed to the inherent problems of, broader patterns of public discourse in the Bicentenary year. On the one hand, museums were influenced by the aspiration – evident, for example, in governmental circles – of framing an understanding of the history of slavery that could be a source of national unity (in keeping with Tony Blair's account of the Bicentenary as 'a chance for all of us to increase our understanding of the heritage we share, celebrate the richness of our diversity and increase our determination to shape the world with the values we share'). On the other, they were repeatedly forced to wrestle with the limitations of this vision, and to recognize the divergent perspectives that different groups within the British population were likely to have on the history in question.

Secondly, museums engaged with the histories and current experiences of local communities. In doing so, they sought both to demonstrate the relevance of the history of slavery to British localities, and cumulatively to pursue the local as an angle of approach to national concerns. Local museums, galleries, libraries and archive centres up and down the country during the Bicentenary year busied themselves with charting, and exposing or rediscovering, the multiple linkages of local people, places and institutions to the larger national and international histories of slavery and anti-slavery – listing local abolitionists or local enslaved or freed African residents, marking the residences and estates of local merchants or landowners with interests in the slave trade or in plantation agriculture, identifying buildings and street-names with slavery connections, and showing how local businesses and trades were bound in to the larger patterns of the triangular trade, whether through the supply of articles (metal bars, manilas, guns etc.) exchangeable for enslaved Africans on the West African Coast, through the production of instruments of torture and restraint, or through manufacturing industries utilising the raw materials produced by slave-based systems of production in the Americas. In exploring and publicising these diverse local connections, exhibitions and archival projects succeeded in extending an awareness of slavery's contribution to British history well beyond the handful of port cities (principally Liverpool, Bristol and London) on which attention had previously been focused. Displays in, for example, Swansea, Bewdley and Dumfries showed how the implicating traces of Bristol's or Liverpool's maritime enterprises extended

across South Wales, up the Severn Valley and around the Solway Firth. Research projects in regions like the North-East and East Anglia – neither of them previously much identified with slavery – uncovered evidence of an extensive local connectedness to slavery and/or abolition out of local archival holdings. Exhibitions allowed visitors access to the previously ‘hidden’ local histories. In some, though by no means in all, cases, this attention to local specificities also embraced a reflection on how the legacies of slavery could be observed in the locality today.

Most museums that seized the opportunity that 2007 offered had the sincere intention of contributing, in some way and on some level, to improving public awareness of, and engagement with, Britain’s past connections to transatlantic slavery. Most of them hoped that doing this would help to bring a better understanding between the groups in British society that are currently divided by their different relationships to this history. Presenting this history in a museum context was, however, a task fraught with sensitivities and tensions. The articles in this issue chart some of those tensions and the way museums and their audiences responded to them.

The first paper in this collection, written by Emma Waterton, provides a context both for the work that museums were attempting to achieve during 2007 and for the rest of the articles in this issue. Waterton undertakes an analysis of the public policy debates that set the tone for the bicentenary, noting a number of recurrent rhetorical resources that emerged within the context of a national performance of collective remembering/forgetting, particularly tropes of ‘moving on’ and ‘the past is the past’. She argues that this apparent performance of national self-examination can be critically examined to reveal a more insidious and anxiety-ridden process of collective amnesia and national forgetting, through which a limited and distinct idea of ‘Britishness’ could be subtly sustained and reinforced.

Geoffrey Cubitt’s paper examines the ways in which issues of resistance were portrayed in exhibitions around Britain. Resistance by the enslaved – a theme central to the recognition of African historical agency but obscured if not ignored in traditional abolitionist commemoration and historiography – became a key issue in discussions around the bicentenary. Cubitt’s paper shows how museums sought to address this theme, but did so with frequently limited success: the importance of resistance was affirmed, but treatments of it were often brief and schematic, and reliant on a few emblematic images. Cubitt explores the reasons for this, and then analyses in greater detail the representational strategies of those museums – especially the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool and Wilberforce House Museum in Hull – that did succeed in giving the theme of resistance a greater development. His conclusion suggests that museums seeking to unsettle previously accredited historical narratives need to cultivate a creative interplay between assertively ‘gestural’ and less aggressively ‘expository’ modes of presentation.

The Bicentenary, and the way it was defined by policymakers, was itself highly contested, most visibly by Toyin Agbetu’s protest to Government representatives and the Queen during a service at Westminster Abbey (Agbetu 2007). These tensions, together with the fact that this history, until recently, was not systematically taught at schools, presented museum curatorial staff with a confronting context within which to develop their exhibitions. Ross Wilson, drawing on theories of governmentality, examines the ways museums helped to shape the Bicentenary and explores the ways in which museums as authorizing and regulating institutions operated, often in spite of stated intentions, to perpetuate a particular ‘vision’ of the past.

Kalliopi Fouseki’s paper examines the community consultation processes that museums undertook in the lead up to the bicentenary and the development of exhibitions. Fouseki, drawing on interviews with both museum staff and members of African-Caribbean community groups who participated in consultation processes, documents the degree of frustration felt by many community representatives. She argues that, despite the intentions of many committed museum staff, the degree to which community representatives and staff ‘talked past’ one another was significant. Central to this miscommunication was the tendency of museum staff to focus on what she terms ‘an object centric’ view of exhibitions and to misunderstand that for many communities the exhibitions were seen as important resources in wider struggles for historical and contemporary recognition and thus social justice.

The final paper, by Laurajane Smith, examines aspects of the audience response to eight exhibitions. This paper focuses on the ‘white British’ response and documents the extent to which those who self-identified as white British engaged in an array of emotional and

discursive strategies whose effect was to insulate the visitor from the emotional impact of acknowledging the history of British involvement with the slave trade. Issues of guilt and shame were often raised by those interviewed, and Smith argues that many people did not have the skills to negotiate these feelings constructively, with the consequence that they tended to disengage from the exhibition they were visiting. Thus, Smith argues, exhibitions dealing with dissonant and controversial topics may need not only to recognise the emotional impact of such exhibitions, but also to provide the resources people may need to negotiate and mediate the emotional affect of such exhibitions.

The articles in this special issue illustrate the complexity of the challenges faced by museums in engaging with the difficult history of Britain's involvement with transatlantic slavery in the public context of the Bicentenary. Thanks not least to the extensive public funding made available on this occasion, principally through the agency of the Heritage Lottery Fund, to support projects dealing with transatlantic slavery and its legacy, 2007 was in important respects a privileged opportunity for museums seeking to promote public acknowledgement of this history and debate over its present implications. Museums and their professional staffs embraced this opportunity with varying degrees of alacrity and varying degrees of confidence and preparedness: they, as well as their audiences, struggled to find coherent ways of coming to terms with a history that is emotionally demanding, socially divisive and politically contentious. Museums strove, often simultaneously, to educate a largely white museum-going public accustomed to viewing the history of slavery through the lens of abolitionist celebrationism; to persuade members of African and African-Caribbean British communities that their voices and memories and cultures and social perspectives were no longer to be excluded from the prevailing institutionally promoted narratives of Britishness; and to accredit the understanding of museums themselves as places given over not to the promulgation of an authoritative view of history and national identity, but to the facilitation of debate and the recognition of multiple perspectives. These were not easily combinable objectives, either discursively or socially, and the public circumstances of the Bicentenary – its momentary character, its emphases on commemoration, the arbitrariness of its focus on a particular historical date, its connectedness to establishment political and religious agendas – did not make it easy for museums to craft constructive and innovative approaches to them. To say this is not to say that nothing was achieved by what was after all an impressive panoply of museum activity, but that was achieved was at least as much a heightened sense of the difficulty of navigating these complex challenges, and of the need for a more sustained investment in exploring and confronting them, as any straightforward advance in public awareness or social understanding. One of the key lessons learned from the Bicentenary must surely be the importance of confronting the fear of addressing dissonant and contested subjects.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.york.ac.uk/1807commemorated/index.html>

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### **\*Laurajane Smith**

Laurajane Smith is a Future Fellow in Heritage and Museum Studies, School of Archaeology and Anthropology, the Australian National University, Canberra. She was co-director of the AHRC funded *1807 Commemorated Project*, based at the University of York, where she worked between 2000-2009. Her research interests lie in challenging the idea of heritage as being primarily or simply an 'object' or 'site', and re-theorizing heritage as a cultural process of meaning and memory making. She is currently undertaking a long-term project, drawing on research in Australia, England and the US, that aims to document the memory and identity work that people engage in while visiting museum exhibitions and heritage sites.

Address:  
School of Archaeology and Anthropology  
Research School of Humanities and the Arts  
College of Arts and Social Sciences  
Sir Roland Wilson Building, 120  
The Australian National University  
Canberra ACT 0200

Tel +61 2 612 58162  
Email: laurajane.smith@anu.edu.au

**\*\* Geoffrey Cubitt**

Geoffrey Cubitt is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History, and a member of the Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies, University of York. He was co-director of the AHRC funded *1807 Commemorated Project*, based at the University of York. His research interests lie partly in the political, intellectual, religious and cultural history of nineteenth-century France, and partly in issues of social memory and in the political, social and cultural aspects of relationships to the past in modern societies more generally.

Address:  
Department of History  
University of York  
Heslington, York  
YO105DD, UK

Tel 01904 324991  
Email: geoff.cubitt@york.ac.uk

**\*\*\*Emma Waterton**

Emma Waterton holds a Lectureship in Social Science, focusing on heritage tourism, at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. She completed her AHRC-funded doctoral research in 2007. In 2006, shortly before submitting her PhD, she took up an RCUK Academic Fellowship in the area of heritage studies at Keele University, where her research emphasized community heritage, representations of the past and the critical analysis of public policy, especially those tackling social inclusion, multiculturalism and expressions of 'Britishness'.

Address:  
Tourism and Heritage Studies  
Department of History  
University of Western Sydney  
Locked Bag 1797  
Penrith South DC  
NSW 1797

Tel +61 2 4736 0056  
Email: e.waterton@uws.edu.au