

Humiliated silence: multiculturalism, blame and the trope of 'moving on'

Emma Waterton*

University of Western Sydney

Abstract

The issue of slavery has received wide media attention in response to the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. Simultaneously, issues of multiculturalism and social exclusion have also been subject to tense debate. This paper aims to examine the rhetorical resources drawn upon at the juncture of these two areas of debate, particularly in terms of how the 'slave trade' and its abolition is understood, constructed and remembered. In order to examine how these issues are manifest, the paper utilizes critical discursive methodologies, which are applied to institutional and 'official' responses to the bicentenary of 1807. This data will be examined in terms of the discursive strategies drawn upon to actively absolve current generations from challenging the latent issues of power operative within modern British society.

Key words: critical discourse analysis; abolition; 1807; historical remembrance; commemoration; collective memory.

Introduction

Writing a preface for a book tackling slavery in the West Indies in 1965, Alan Bullock remarked that: 'The West Indians are not the only people looking for a new identity, so are the British, and an important part of the process, for the British... is to revalue their history in the circumstances of a very different world' (Bullock 1965: 8). In the book to which Bullock was contributing, Eric Williams had concluded his analysis with the derisive observation that '... British historians write almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it' (1966: 233). Although occurring some forty-one years since the publication of his book, the 2007 commemorations for the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade have done little to refute Williams's point. Instead, the commemorative year of 2007 offered a politically-charged attempt to collectively remember a difficult past in a manner best understood as a form of 'controlled consensus', through which the triumphant passing of the abolition Act worked to conceal the more uncomfortable and controversial aspects of that history (after Conway 2009). Indeed, as Kerr-Ritchie (2008: 535) points out, the idea that '... William Wilberforce ended British participation in the international slave trade was the most popular representation of British abolition during [the] bicentennial year'. Here, a crucial and opportune moment to critically examine and re-evaluate a history of exploitation became, instead, something far less inspiring – something, in fact, that contributed to the continuing neglect of the difficulties and anxieties faced by marginalised groups as they struggle against a racialized politics of belonging and national identity (Phillips 2006).

Given the unhelpful tones of Bullock and Williams, it might seem somewhat surprising that the 2007 bicentenary received such widespread political and popular attention in Britain (Paton 2009; Paton and Webster 2009). This specific commemorative act, however, needs to be understood within a broader context; one that Elazar Barkan (2000: xvii) has labelled 'the new international emphasis on morality', which, he argues, has prompted a subsequent outpouring of national 'guilt'. This is particularly relevant in those countries that bear reminders of colonialism, persecution or genocide, with examples of nationalized attempts at self-

examination occurring around memories of the *jungun ianfu* (comfort women) system in Japan, legacies of the Stolen Generations in Australia, and the Holocaust (Brooks 1999; Augoustinos and LeCouteur 2004; McGarty and Bliuc 2005; Bindenagel 2006; Wohl *et al.* 2006; Hastie 2009). This trend for reassessing national pasts emerges out of the current use of traumatic histories as a source for group self-image (Nora 1996; Misztal 2004). Thus, while the commemoration of the bicentenary was in many ways a parochial affair, concerned with the political, social and cultural ramifications it might have for Britain, it was in many other ways also an international one; and it was international because within this flurry of activity, Britain came to be recognized—officially at least – as a successful model of a multicultural, inclusive and diverse nation (McRoberts 2001).

To the contrary, this paper argues that events such as the bicentenary tell us something rather different about existing social relationships within Britain. Quite what they tell us is perhaps not something we were expecting—or wanting—to hear. This is because such moments of self-examination, tied as they are to the distribution of popular memory, often mask more insidious processes of collective amnesia and national forgetting, through which oppressive power relations are subtly sustained and reinforced. Thus, while the paper takes into account this model of the multicultural nation, my purpose is to suggest that it is only a *projection*, operating at the level of rhetoric, with the 2007 commemorations better understood as a process of collective *forgetting* (Forty 1999: 9). To understand this process of forgetting, I turn to Paul Connerton's (2008; see Smith this volume) notion of forgetting as 'humiliated silence', in which the unacknowledged absences of discussion regarding histories that invoke shame, guilt and past harm are conspicuous. As Connerton (2008: 67) points out, 'few things are more eloquent than a massive silence'. The brutality and racial violence enmeshed with the slave trade provides one such example – this is not a past that has been permanently lost, however. Rather, this silence that will continue to bubble menacingly beneath the surface of overt attempts to construct a national narrative in which the violence of the past is dismissed in favour of instilling cohesion.

Analyses of discourse

This research draws upon wider analyses seeking to understand the discursive repertoires commonly drawn upon to sustain the power relations of a majority/dominant group, particularly in relation to 'race issues' (see Wetherell and Potter 1992; Augoustinos and Reynolds 2001; van den Berg *et al.* 2003). Specifically, I apply Augoustinos and Every's (2007; see also Augoustinos *et al.* 1999, 2002; Augoustinos and LeCouteur 2004) useful combination of discursive psychology and critical discourse analysis to 'official' publications and speeches regarding 1807. The analysis also draws from the work of van Dijk (1997), who contends that many attitudes and views towards minority or ethnic groups utilized in popular discourse (see Smith, this volume) derive from more elite interpretations of these issues, such as political and parliamentary talk. Finally, my approach also borrows from Riggins (1997: 3), who suggests that as analysts we should ask of each text, 'which group in society is likely to benefit from the opinions expressed' within it? All three approaches take language as functional, constructive and contextual, enabling it to become something that *makes things happen*, or something that analysts can make fine-grained observations about in terms of the variability of what people say and the purpose(s) it serves (Augoustinos *et al.* 1999). Collectively, they provide an empirical framework that focuses on the study of texts, speeches and talk and the persuasive mechanisms drawn upon to make sense of an issue. This framework is applied primarily to Tony Blair's first official address regarding the issue of slavery and is supplemented by parliamentary records, comprised of speeches prepared in advance and read (usually) in a highly controlled environment where positive self-presentation and self-glorification is routine (van Dijk 1997: 36).

As this analysis will show, certain discursive strategies and patterns of institutional talk were drawn upon in order to actively exculpate and absolve current generations from challenging latent issues of power operative within modern British society. Structuring the commemoration in this way conforms to what Woolgar and Pawluch (2004: 46; 1985) have labelled 'ontological gerrymandering', which amounts to having the power to fix a debate within

particular boundaries of discussion and thus insulate the issues at stake for particular social groups from interference by alternative perspectives. Here, the parameters of debate were pre-defined, isolating those aspects of the past that were open to debate and discussion and cutting off those that were not in a manner that worked to the advantage of a particular social group or proponent of the debate, in this case the dominant ethnic majority, or white social groups. For the bicentenary, such boundaries closed down discussions around the horrors, realities and responsibilities of the slave trade and presented as unproblematic the role of Parliament and key individuals in abolishing the trade, bounded by discussions of their good intentions. In other words, as Hesse (2002: 150) points out, the memory of the exploitation of African people, '...is established as the memory of its heroic and inevitable abolition', thereby sanitising those everyday legacies of discrimination and racism that are emphatically *not* 'the slave trade'. The formal act of commemoration can thus be seen as a more subtle and ongoing process of negotiating what it means to be 'British', through which notions of guilt, responsibility and culpability are repudiated in favour of a more positive picture of the past. Although hardly surprising, given that acknowledging a brutal history could never be easy, it is nonetheless contradictory in light of more recent claims to multiculturalism, inclusion and the recognition of diversity.

In what follows, the variable ways in which 'the slave trade' and 'abolition' were represented are made apparent. In particular, the paper considers the carefully constructed – and subtle – repertoire of 'moving on' utilized within institutional discourse, which is often juxtaposed with talk of long-held traditions of morality and justice. These are, as van Dijk (1997: 36) points out, "'national" correlates of what are known as face-keeping or impression management strategies'. The bicentenary is thus a paradoxical issue, through which set-pieces and political speeches are organized so as to mitigate damage not only in the form of negative impressions on a specific occasion, but for more long-term, enduring judgements and general impressions (van Dijk 1992: 90). These repertoires are thus ideologically, discursively and psychologically significant, as they allow dominant constructions of the slave trade to push forward implicitly manipulative and revisionist accounts of the past. Thus, while commonly rendered passive within dominant narratives of the bicentenary, notions of 'multiculturalism' are implicitly used to present those groups agitating for recognition as *actively preventing*, or threatening, the processes of 'moving on'. The paper thus sets out to examine the way politicians talked about abolition, premised, very often, on ideas of multiculturalism, tolerance and diversity, but also involving a more subtle process of marginalization, in which attempts to genuinely engage with the horror, brutality and legacies of inequality are characterized as problematic and disruptive to ideas of a multicultural Britain.

The psychology of the bicentenary, or why now?

I begin this examination by posing the question: why now? This may seem an odd place to start, especially as the 2007 commemorations are obvious in their temporal links to the passing of the 1807 Act. Although some commentators rightly observe that the slave trade did not end in 1807 – it lingered illegally for some time longer – it is not for this reason that I pose my question. Nor do I pose it in an attempt to justify the tacit assumption that such commemorations are an 'inevitable development' for individuals or groups dealing with traumatic pasts (Novick 1999: 2). As convincing as these arguments may seem, I do not find them useful here. Quite the opposite, I want to suggest that the absence of national talk or consciousness *prior* to that surrounding the 2007 commemorations cannot simply be assumed to be a symptom or manifestation of repression, or a 'return of the repressed' (Novick 1999: 3). Instead, I argue that the commemorations were tied more closely to exclusive ideals of 'Britishness' and self-image, and attempts to lessen the permeability of social norms and hierarchies brought about by unsettled times (Misztal 2004: 74). In every sense, to borrow from Misztal (2004: 74), Britain is in the midst of a political climate in which memory has assumed enormous importance. Demographic shifts, the increasing visibility of asylum seekers via media hysteria, and a retreat from multiculturalism triggered in part by the 'race riots' in Oldham, Bradford and Burnley 2001 and so forth, have foregrounded and politicized a range of collective memories complicit in the construction of British identity.

For Wertsch (2008, see also Roediger and Wertsch 2008), collective memory is a narrative of the past shared by group members that organizes how they recount and relate to their past through its embedding in literature, acts of commemoration, politics and customs. As a cultural practice, collective memory thus becomes collaborative, defined not so much as 'memory of a group' but 'memory *by* a group' (Wertsch 2008: 121). In Wertsch's study on the manifestations of the modern state in collective memory he draws upon two categories: specific narratives and schematic narrative templates. The former are narratives that detail specific events and people in a specific time and place. The latter consist of general patterns, narratives or tendencies, all of which plug into a single storyline recurrent within a collective tradition (Wertsch 2008: 123). The bicentenary lies somewhere in between, becoming what Novick (1998: 4) refers to as a 'memory spasm', or what Wetherell (2003: 11) calls a 'sticking point'. Here, the commemoration offers an opportunity to ostensibly 'remember' an event that coincides with a 'round-numbered' anniversary, while ultimately it is used to attract focus away from current concerns of racism through national self-congratulation. In other words, the bicentenary became an opportunity to remember specific instances of the abolition while also shaping a collective and consensual *schematic narrative template* of what it means to be 'British'.

The trope of 'moving on', or what Macdonald (2005) refers to as the 'you've never had it so good' mentality, was a motif commonly drawn upon in the political set-pieces used to announce the 2007 commemoration. On the surface, the notion of 'moving on' is animated by two assumptions: one, as Macdonald (2005) points out, '...looking back at the horrors [is] essentially psychologically unhealthy as well as politically unhelpful'; and two, the injustices of the past that disadvantaged groups are encouraged to 'move on' from are somehow absent from the present and future (Le Couteur 2001: 151). While for Macdonald (2005: 53) 'moving on' is bound up with a Christianized 'forgiveness' trope, it is also underpinned by a range of clinching arguments, or self-sufficient rhetorical devices, identified by Wetherell and Potter (1992; see also Augoustinos *et al.* 2002; Augoustinos and LeCouteur 2006). These devices include statements such as 'everybody should be treated equally', 'you cannot turn back the hands of time', 'present generations cannot be blamed for the mistakes of past generations', 'nobody should be compelled' and 'we have to live in the twentieth century', and find congruence with liberal-egalitarian notions of freedom, individual rights and justice (Augoustinos and LeCouteur 2006: 241). Like other self-sufficient arguments, the notion of 'moving on' provides a basis for accountability, or a familiar and thus socially acceptable maxim drawn upon to legitimize existing unequal social relations (Augoustinos *et al.* 2002: 110). Its mobilization is a pervasive and persuasive attempt to mitigate or gloss over social inequities and reproduce a range of social disadvantages. Thus, while on the surface it appears liberal, sensitive and ethically managed, it inevitably circles around issues of race, racism and the negative positioning of marginalized groups, such that it is they, themselves, who are seen to be perpetuating a racist discourse of blame.

Remembering the abolition, forgetting the 'trade'

The transatlantic slave trade is the largest enslavement operation ever to have occurred. This is so not only in terms of the sheer number of African people captured and enslaved, but also in part because of the distances covered, the number of countries involved and, ultimately, the scale of lives lost (Teye and Timothy 2004: 147). Transatlantic trading also gained notoriety in terms of its timescale, legalization and explicitly racist underpinnings (Diene 2001). As Teye and Timothy (2004: 147) note: '...during a period of about 350 years, an estimated ten million Africans...survived the trans-Atlantic voyage as human cargo to be purchased by White plantation owners and slave traders in the so-called New World'. As UNESCO's Slave Route Project highlights, this estimate of ten million, itself contested for being overly cautious, incorporates only those who *survived* the journey, and is dwarfed by estimates of the total number of Africans forced to embark on the journey, which some scholars put between seventeen and twenty million people (Oostindie 2005: 67). Across this 350-year period Britain's involvement was significant. As Lovejoy and Richardson (1999: 334) estimate, almost '...one out of every two enslaved Africans shipped across the Atlantic was transported in British

vessels...'. Britain's role formally ceased with the Abolition Act of 1807, which, as Oostindie (2005: 57) points out, conveniently provides a 'ground-breaking...end' to a horrific story '...to praise and explain'. It was this act of remembering that was earmarked, as early as 2005, as the focus for national commemorative work around issues of enslavement and the exploitation of African people.

What is important about this specific narrative is that it constitutes only one of many available ways to frame the exploitation of African people, a point that did not go without conflict and dissent:

...people of Afrikan descent have a right to determine what aspects of this traumatic period of our history should be commemorated and in what way. The fight for freedom and our continued quest for justice in the educational system, housing, employment and mental health and penal institutions, demonstrates that our situation has not changed to any great extent... The COBG does not, therefore, support any celebration, actions or symbols that commemorate the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade per se. (Consortium of Black Groups 2007; see also Ligali 2005).

While the act of commemoration could have taken up a different anniversary, and certainly one in which African people were not constructed as '...passive recipients of emancipation' (Ligali 2005: 5), it is nonetheless the 1807 Act – which did not end the profiteering of British companies from the enslavement of African people – that came to prominence. In telling this story of abolition, other narratives about the slave trade and the emancipation of African people were excluded, overwritten and ultimately rejected.

One of the first political accounts produced to address the issues of slavery and the slave trade was the then Prime Minister Tony Blair's discussion of 'The Shame of Slavery' in the *New Nation*, 2006. This account placed Blair in a powerful and strategic position from which to shape collective memory and enact a clear instance of 'ontological gerrymandering'.

Extract 1:

(P1) The transatlantic slave trade stands as one of the most inhuman enterprises in history. At a time when the capitals of Europe and America championed the Enlightenment rights of man [sic], their merchants were enslaving a continent. Racism, not the rights of man [sic] drove the horrors of the slave trade. Some 12 million were transported. Some three million died.

(P2) Slavery's impact upon Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe was profound. Thankfully, Britain was the first county to abolish the trade. As we approach the commemoration for the 200th anniversary of that abolition, it is only right we also recognize the active role Britain played until then in the slave trade (Blair 2006: 2).

(P3) It is hard to believe that what would now be a crime against humanity was legal at the time. Personally I believe the bicentenary offers us a chance not just to say how profoundly shameful the slave trade was—how we condemn its existence utterly and praise those who fought for its abolition, but also to express our deep sorrow that it ever happened, that it ever could have happened and to rejoice at the different and better times we live in today (Blair 2006: 2).

The downplaying of Britain's role in the process of enslavement was key to the official discourse surrounding the bicentenary. This extract revolves around a transitive material process, in which an actor, process and affect are nominated. Here, 'slavery' (P2) is constructed as the agent or actor, and is granted the causal powers to drive a process that profoundly impacted upon the histories of a number of countries. Although in reality a *process* of exploitation specifically targeted at African people, 'slavery' is linguistically presented as the direct subject,

or designation, in this extract (P2). This metaphorical representation thereby allows 'Africa', 'the Caribbean', 'the Americas' and 'Europe' to be coordinated equally as social actors *in contrast* to that of slavery, such that the former collectively become 'the affected' in a process driven by the latter. This enables a shift in responsibility from state-sanctioned policy endorsed *within* Britain, which is extensively excluded from collective memory, to the abstract noun 'slavery'. Although 'slavery' is signalled as a key element of the commemoration, Blair is able to quickly diffuse his discussion by moving immediately to 'the trade', an agent that is further diluted as the piece progresses. As a result, the affects of 'slavery' in those countries listed are reconfigured as collectively, equally and impersonally coordinated *together* as 'profound', thus implying that the consequences for each are equivalent and unspeakable. The work of Paul Connerton (2008) is useful for understanding this process, in particular his discussion of 'forgetting as humiliated silence'. This details a covert form of forgetting that renders traumatic and difficult collective memories beyond words, and thus inaccessible. This mode of forgetting has become a tactical and tacit ally of a more enduring form of remembering, which draws upon what has become a normative and fundamentally positive foundation for British self-image – a version of 'who we are and what we stand for' (Heisler 2008). For Britain, this underlying pattern of remembering valorises nationhood and celebrates ideas of benevolence, heroism, morality, justice and triumphalism. We can see these qualities tangled up with images of Imperial Britain, for example, as much as we see them entangled with abolition (Cleall 2008). What this alliance allows for, then, is the wholly uncritical and unquestioned assumption that focussing on 'abolition' provides a complete, consensual and satisfactory analogue for remembering the exploitation of African people. This has resulted in a strangely ambivalent process of celebrated remembering and conscious forgetting, through which conflicting narratives of the past compete not only for a sense of legitimacy and authorization, but for ownership and control. It has become what Ashworth (1995) calls a process of 'disinheritance', in which one group's sense of history is written into the national narrative at the expense of others. As LeCouteur and Augoustinos (2001: 215) point out, it is precisely in this sort of situation – in which blame, culpability and guilt are negotiated – that issues of racism and prejudice become implicitly embedded within dominant institutional practices.

As 'the trading' emerges as a blemished chapter in the history of Britain (see Waterton and Wilson 2009), we start to see the beginnings of a persistent line drawn between 'the past' and 'the present' highlighted by linguistic markers such as 'until then' (P2), which work to contain the blemishes – the wrongdoings – to the past and impose a discontinuity with the present. This breaking of the past and present plays a fundamental role in setting-up a 'new Britain', one whose continuity from the distant past is severed, thereby removing the categorization of 'our' from the past. This is realized explicitly in the oscillation between pronouns such as '*their* merchants' (P1) and the 'better times *we* live in today' (P3). Following from this, 'we' cannot, therefore, ever be the inheritors of that past and its responsibilities, because there is now a 'new' Britain, one that is radically different and better than the old regime: the diachronic – and therefore accountable – subject disappears (Booth 1999). As Booth (1999: 250) points out, '[m]ost fundamentally, because we are not one with the perpetrators, because we do not share with them a political identity, we are not accountable for their injustices' (Booth 1999: 250). As such, the promulgation of this cultural narrative means that people in Britain are largely unable to self-categorize as members of a group that committed harm (Wohl *et al.* 2006: 9). Paradoxically, while there is a strongly-held view that one cannot feel guilty about those things you did not commit, there is no such injunction against feeling pride in a temporally distant group's achievements (McGarty and Bliuc 2004: 114). In these manoeuvrings, attempts to make a dominant population accountable are disarmed and dismissed and the brutality of slavery and the ethos behind the trading masked by the mode of forgetting as humiliated silence: they are things best forgotten.

Two key points are worth highlighting here. First, the debate is organized to privilege the munificence of Britain in abolishing the slave trade. Second, any focus on the present is explicit in its aims to valorise the harmonious and positive conditions of Britain today. In conjunction with highlighting Britain's role in abolition, this works to not only inoculate Britain against talk of culpability but also sets in place an overarching expression of gratitude. This surfaced repeatedly in related parliamentary debates:

We should celebrate today that it was this country, under the hand of morally outraged citizens, that brought legalized slavery to an end (Baroness Hanham, *Official Report*, 10th May 2007, c. 1581).

This indeed is an historic moment for the United Kingdom, which led the world in legislating against the vile trade in the slavery of human beings' (Mr John Prescott, *Official Report*, 20th March 2007, c. 687).

This country was the first in Europe, other than Denmark, to outlaw the slave trade, and the Act was the catalyst for the adoption of similar legislation around the world. It became a moral benchmark of which other civilized societies rightly took note. The passage of the Act is heartening to those who are conscious of the early foundations of our democratic society (Mr William Hague, *Official Report*, 20 March 2007, c. 969).

As Wohl *et al.* (2006: 7) point out, this positioning of positive aspects of a national past (the feel-good factor) *in comparison* to other colonial nations serves as a reinforcement of a positive social identity that works explicitly to counter and subdue collective guilt, 'even when the ingroup's harm doing has been considerable'. It is thus an example of 'ingroup glorification', though which one group is characterized as 'better' or 'more worthy' than others (Wohl *et al.* 2006; see also Baumeister and Hastings 1997). What is particularly striking here is the importance of the United Kingdom being the *first* nation to outlaw slavery, despite both Denmark and Haiti doing so first. Bound up with this forced emphasis on Britain is an undoubted need for the narrative to add, as well, to the broader case often made about *progressive* Europeans, earmarked as excelling and thus benevolently tending to non-European nations. Such discussions in parliamentary debate are replete with positive self-representations tied up with *our* country, *our* history and *our* traditions, that at the same time work to reinforce the boundaries between a progressive 'us' and 'the Other'. It is Britain's actions in abolishing 'the slave trade' that is worthy of thanks, a point rehearsed in popular chatter associated with the BBC's Have Your Say¹ topic concerned with the commemorations:

We should mark the anniversary by celebrating the fact that it was Britain that did the most to stop it. We were the **first** country to ban it, and the size and power of the Royal Navy during the 19th century gave us the power to destroy it elsewhere. No, we should not apologize. **In fact, a "thank you" from a large part of Africa would be in order** (PIC1 BBC, Posted 19th March 2007, my emphasis)

Today is another reason to remember and give thanks for the British Empire. Slavery existed since the beginning of man [sic]. And was practiced by all races, religions and cultures. Yet 200 years ago it was the British, specifically British Christians, who was the **first** to outlaw it. Not Africans. Not Muslims. Not Americans. But the British (SB1 BBC, Posted 19th March 2007, my emphasis).

Again, it is Britain's role in abolition *in the face of continued trading* by other countries that is important, particularly in terms of the subject positioning this grants for the nation. In particular, it is the idea that Britain did this *first* that is highlighted. As such, Britain comes to be realized as both rational and forward-thinking, while its role in the 'slave trade' is simultaneously made to seem passive within the metaphoric representation of enslavement as deviant, despicable and shameful. This form of positive self-presentation is a distancing mechanism that works to manoeuvre Britain away from messages of responsibility, while also firming up Britain's role as a *leading* – or, more accurately, *the lead* – player driven by moral and politically progressive motivations.

Extract 2:

(P1) Until the 19th Century, slavery was considered an acceptable part of the economic system, enabling many countries in Europe and beyond to profit and prosper from the trade of goods produced by a vast pool of enslaved labour. Exact figures are impossible to establish, but it is thought that 12 million Africans were loaded onto slave ships.

(P2) Although today everyone recognizes that it was morally reprehensible, politicians, businessmen [sic], scientists and even churches justified the legitimacy of slavery at the time. British subjects were involved with the trade as shipping owners, makers of chains and other instruments of control, goods manufacturers and as plantation and slave owners.

(P3) Whilst we regret and strongly condemn the evils of the transatlantic slave trade, the 1807 Act marked an important point in this country's development towards the nation it is today—a critical step into the modern world, and into a new and more just moral universe (DCMS 2007: 6–7).

The recurring patterns of boundary-drawing around 'the past', effectively protecting contemporary society from engaging with the legacies of slavery, in this extract call upon morality to linguistically distance 'Britain of the past' from that of today (P1 and P2). This is a melding of two of Wetherell and Potter's (1992) clinching arguments—'you cannot turn the clock backwards' and 'we have to live in the twentieth (first) century'—for powerful political effect. Discontinuity with the past is strongly enforced, particularly with the addition of the church ('even the church') to the string of agents drawn upon (P2). The point being pushed here is that you cannot judge people with current values (P1); this sidesteps the broader argument that slavery and the slave trade should not only be condemned by today's moral standards but should *always* have been so (Wolfe 2006):

There are those who say that we should apologize for our pivotal role in the slave trade, but I say that we should not. It took place at a time in history when the majority of people worldwide were ignorant of its true nature or saw no moral wrong in it (Mr Moss, *Official Report*, 20th March 2007, c. 741).

As a process of impression management or face-keeping, this works in support of a positive, self-presentation of Britain today, and is strategically employed to justify the slave trade as part of a wider process of history (P3). It is thus envisaged as a related or linked process, in which the slave trade is positioned as a fundamental step from which Britain was able to bring about a 'more just moral universe', a point reiterated in parliamentary debates:

Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that it is a time to remember the terrible crimes and unspeakable inhumanity of the Atlantic slave trade, but also to note that it was the early development in Britain of a free Parliament, a free press and a public conscience that allowed our country to lead the way among European nations in removing that scourge from the earth (Mr William Hague, *Official Report*, 7th Mar 2007, c. 1505).

We should be thankful for, and celebrate wholeheartedly, the fact that it was our country that produced the moral giants of their time – our countrymen and women who, against all odds and with incredible dedication, changed society fundamentally and irreversibly for the better. We owe them a deep debt of gratitude (Mr Moss, *Official Report*, 20th March 2007, c. 742).

By setting up the slave trade as a contrastive position from which to view the present day, the trope of 'moving on' gathers potency. But this employs the trope of 'moving on' in a slightly different sense: 'moving on', as the official line implies, is something that the British nation has always done. It thus becomes something that is psychologically significant and manipulative, in which social actors agitating for alternative constructions of the past can be recast as agents *actively preventing* the country's development. This deployment of very specific social

categorization is a powerful way of justifying the current situation in modern-day Britain, in which a free press, free parliament and public conscience stand as symbols for a multicultural and just society. It becomes, as Cleall (2008: 457) points out, the institutionalization of Thomas Clarkson's 'long march of progress', such that questioning the schematic narrative template underpinning the abolition narrative simultaneously questions the 'morally pure' interpretation of Britain. So much is invested in this conceptualisation that the commemorations cease to be about the past:

... it should be about the present and the future. Perhaps we can claim a better legacy than we have had when we recognize that this country has a proud record of rescuing people (Baroness Hanham *Official Report*, 7th June 2007, c. 1237).

It is in this statement that we perhaps come closest to realizing the bigger project subtly weaving its way through the commemoration. This idea of Britain as a 'world policeperson', with a long tradition of 'rescuing people' is a central element of what Liu and Hilton (2005: 538) call a group's *charter* and what Wertsch (2007, 2008) refers to as a schematic narrative template: here we have the timeless essence of Britain. Importantly, this essence has been concretized via Britain's inception as one of five permanent members of the United Nation's Security Council (Liu and Hilton 2005: 538).

Extract 3:

This anniversary is a chance for all of us to deepen understanding of our past, celebrate the richness of our diversity and increase our determination to shape the world with the values we share. I hope you will get involved in some way. There should be something for everyone. This is everyone's bicentenary (Blair 2007: 1).

The positive spin, utilized to reinforce a message of 'moving on', is also employed in a way that enables Blair to speak to the majority population and memorialize the abolition as something that does not share the painful legacies of the enslavement of African people. The wider approach to memorializing the past is thus inextricably shot through with attempts to obfuscate dissonance, in which the commemoration becomes more about asserting a sense of consensus and unity and less about recognizing conflict. Indeed, in teasing back the initial veneer of 'national remembering', it quickly becomes apparent that this event is a mechanism through which to promote a particular ideal of Britishness and consensus (Macdonald 2005: 60; see Smith this volume). Rather than emphasizing multiple narratives by which this history could be understood, the commemoration is taken as a context within which to reassert the ideals of Britishness and gloss over inequities in existing social relations.

It was important that the celebrations should be co-ordinated as a national coming together (1st Meeting of the 2007 Bicentenary Advisory Group – 19th Jan 2006).

...2007 was not just an African-Caribbean celebration but was for all communities (1st Meeting of the 2007 Bicentenary Advisory Group – 19th Jan 2006).

In making appeals to a far wider collective, the discursive spaces within which dissonance could be engaged with are closed and replaced by what Wetherell and Potter (1992) refer to as a 'togetherness' motif. As Augoustinos *et al.* (2002) point out in a different context, this emphasis on togetherness can also be understood as the enacting of what Billig (1995) refers to as an appeal to 'banal nationalism'. What is significant here is that this applies specifically to the history of abolition and not to the broader history of British complicity in slavery:

The kinds of stories told about abolition, especially perhaps those told in overtly political arenas, have too often marginalized this shared past. They have claimed the abolition of the trade as distinctly British, whilst suggesting the history of slavery itself to be more relevant to Britain's 'black' communities than 'white' ones, as though the entangled history of slavery could be unravelled (Cleall 2008: 458).

The 2007 commemoration does indeed, therefore, become a complete, consensual and morally satisfactory analogue for remembering. In denying the centrality of dissonance, it becomes too difficult for community groups that sit *outside* of the repertoire of togetherness to take issue with the institutional messages imparted. To quote from Leung (2006: 169), this borrows from the construction of 'a benevolent state which has at every point offered its hand in partnership to "others". Practices of racial violence and occupation are dismissed in the righteous act of instilling order and harmony. In return, it is implied that the "others" should respect and appreciate the generosity of those ... who bequeathed them privilege of membership in the nation'. The realities of slavery are thus part and parcel of the histories that are dismissed and deemed inassimilable with broader narratives of benevolence and contemporary British values. This is explicitly embedded in Wetherell and Potter's self-sufficient argument 'everyone should be treated equally' and is perhaps the point at which it becomes almost impossible for alternative narratives of slavery, the slave trade and abolition to be pushed forward: to do so would be decidedly un-British, would contravene the progression of 'moving on' and would, fundamentally, disrupt egalitarian principles of equality.

As Kerr-Ritchie (2008) suggests, this narrative of abolition has subtly changed over time. While the dominant mode of remembering continued to draw upon the unforgettable one-man narrative of Wilberforce and the predictable 'abolition discourse' (see Waterton and Wilson 2009; Waterton *et al.* 2010), a range of local, regional and national commemorative events opened themselves up to an exploration of black agency and the legacies of slavery (see Cubitt this volume). Britain's role as a 'trading' nation was also explored in a number of these museum exhibitions, alongside the establishment of a narrative depicting a dissenting public engaged in an anti-slavery campaign. Yet, as this paper has sought to suggest, the schematic narrative template described at the outset of this paper remained one wedded to rehearsing a narrative the espoused the benevolent nature of Britain, mediated by the official accounts of the past presented by Blair and the government. This collective memory, to borrow from Wertsch (2002: 85), was bolstered not because it presents a 'truer' picture of British history than alternative versions, but because it was important for the public to *believe* it, to *own* it, and thus render it a usable past in the wider project of building a cohesive society. It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the consequences this act of remembering has for practices of interpretation within the heritage sector. The following papers in this special volume, however, make up for the partial picture I have offered through their explorations of the bicentenary within the museum sector. My purpose has simply been to demonstrate that representations of the past in the present *matter*, especially when entering the public domain as vociferously as the commemorations of abolition.

Conclusion: when 'the scar does the work of the wound'²

Although it has not been the purpose of this article to examine constructions of racism and prejudice *per se*, it does not hold that this act of commemoration—and the mode of forgetting as humiliated silence—is a one-off. Rather, this paper is an initial attempt to plug into wider commentaries about the operation of institutional racism in Britain in the service of white, Christian subjects. While the narrative under review here was in many ways an intermittent flare-up of both overt and banal nationalism, it was also one, I would argue, that drew upon a more pervasive discourse of British identity, in which the history of slavery and the slave trade were disavowed in order to retain the popular memory of a benevolent, just and moral nation. Thus, rather than acknowledge different voices within the marking of the bicentenary, official commemorations sought to limit the impact of dissenting voices and avoid the awkward reawakening of guilt and reparation. This, I have argued, represents a contravention of the ethics of memory, due largely to the disjuncture between the demands for shared memories that acknowledge a violent past that have strong legacies in the present and demands for a form of remembering that did not put in jeopardy an imagined British community based on tropes of morality and benevolence.

In concluding, I want to refer back to the question I posed at the outset of this paper: why now? Throughout this analysis, I have tried to keep at the forefront of my discussion intimations of the logic behind marking the 1807 commemorations in terms of the self-presentation of Britain

and Britishness. In this paper, I have sketched out some of the underlying messages produced within the boundaries of official attempts to deal with a sensitive and controversial issue. Primarily, I have noted that these boundaries appear more concerned with mitigating blame and responsibility than they do with acknowledging and exploring a painful past, and as such, provide a discursive space from which to justify unequal power relations in British society. In particular, the trope of 'moving on' is flexibly and consistently drawn upon as a motive for an exclusive, yet unified and homogenous, audience to collectively forget the past. My main point is that commemorating British history *in this way* put Blair in a position to continue to popularize a schematic narrative template that is essentially constitutive of a particular version of Britain's past at the expense of competing discourses. In the process, he was also able to provide a collective self-understanding of what it means to be 'British' in the face of insecurities brought about by multiculturalism, cultural diversity, and an international focus on morality. Rather than engage in genuine initiatives to explore the past in a manner that held positive—but costly—implications for Britain's image as a model of a multicultural nation, this process preferred to obfuscated issues of 'race', 'racism' and the negative positioning of marginalized groups. In short, while focussing upon the enslavement and exploitation of African people would have required a sustained and painful engagement with racism, oppression, brutality and depravity, a focus on its abolition could be far more evasive. Indeed, it would be virtually cost-free.

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Notes

- ¹ The BBC *Have your Say* forum is a well-used online extension of the BBC News webpages, where readers are invited to share their comments regarding current news topics and events. It is, however, not without its critics.
- ² Wieseltier, L. (1989) 'Scar Tissue', *New Republican*, 200 (June): 20.

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***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'. She is the author of *Politics and the Discourses of Heritage in Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan 2010), co-author of *Heritage, Communities and Archaeology* with Laurajane Smith (Duckworth, 2009) and assistant editor of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*.

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