State Authority and the Public Sphere: Ideas on the Changing Role of the Museum as a Canadian Social Institution

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Abstract

Museums are important public sites for the authentication and presentation of heritage in Western cultures. The authority of museums is derived from their long history as repositories of material culture and as agents of identity formation, nationalism, and most recently, social inclusion. But in a country such as Canada where global economics and popular culture combine with an unprecedented influx of immigrants, how society imagines itself and how the nation articulates its community and its heritage is changing radically. Issues of power, meaning, authenticity and citizenship have threatened the museum's representational authority. How are Canadian museums responding to these changes, and is their authority now up for debate? Or is the need to assert authority a problem in itself and can museums evolve a new type of discourse about heritage? This paper investigates museum authority inherent in its simultaneous roles as voice of the state and as a public space for opinion and meaning making. It focuses attention on Canadian museums and government policies that have influenced their authority, in particular, theoretical implications of the current drive for 'social cohesion'. An exhibit on the Underground Railroad and African-Canadian history at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto is examined to consider how museums as instruments of the state can be re-tuned as sites of public identity discourse and social inclusion.

Introduction

Museums are important public sites for the authentication and presentation of 'heritage' in Western cultures. Heritage can be defined as the legacy of the natural and human world that society wishes to pass on to future generations. The authority of museums is derived from their long history as repositories of material culture and as agents of identity formation, nationalism, and most recently, social inclusion. As influential sites, what is shown and what is not shown can have a major impact on how society sees itself and presents itself to others. But in a country like Canada, where global economics and popular culture combine with an unprecedented influx of immigrants, how society imagines itself and how the nation articulates its community and its heritage is changing radically. Issues of power, meaning, authenticity and citizenship have threatened the museum's representational authority. How are Canadian museums responding to these changes, and is their authority now up for debate? Or is the need to assert authority a problem in itself and can Canadian museums evolve a new type of discourse about heritage?

This paper considers the nature of the public sphere in which museums operate, and investigates museum authority as a contested issue inherent in its simultaneous roles as voice of the state articulating identity and nationalism, and as a public space for opinion and meaning-making. It looks at how the museum's power to determine the national narrative, and limit voices, has changed over the years in Canada. It focuses attention on Canadian federal policies that have influenced the authority of museums, in particular, theoretical

implications of the current policy drive for 'social cohesion'. It describes how Canadian museums are gradually moving away from acting for and about diverse communities, and are instead offering their expert voice as one among many. An exhibit on the Underground Railroad at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto is examined to consider how museums as instruments of the state can be re-tuned as sites of public identity discourse and social inclusion. Through this exhibit, Canada's National Historic Sites reworks its traditional approach to exhibition planning and design in order to open up the process of national identity-building and to focus instead on the social process of citizenship. A product of a collaborative process that encouraged networking among African-Canadians and openness by heritage professionals, the exhibit paved the way for both formal and substantive changes in designating and commemorating Canadian heritage sites.

The Museum as Authority

Traditionally, the museum is one of those institutions holding 'symbolic power,' acting as important places for the accumulation of information, communication, material and financial resources, and shaping the ways in which information and symbolic content are produced and circulated in society (Thompson, 1995). Harold Innis (1951) would express such an institution as a 'monopoly of knowledge', a centralized structure of power, situated in an imposing city building, controlling the preservation of historical knowledge and identity of the dominant culture, and also world knowledge seen through the lens of the dominant culture. In terms of Marxist cultural theorists, such as Gramsci, Althusser, Williams and many others, museums would be considered a means by which ideology, that unconscious bias by which we live, is reinforced, not only through its overt communications but through its very way of being in the world. It could be seen as hegemonic, one of the ways in which the cultural ideologies of the ruling class are made acceptable to the masses. There is always some resistance to the hegemony when subcultures develop their own meanings, as we shall see outlined in the case study below. But through its physical structure, its categorization of knowledge, the flow of visitors and information through its halls and its determination of what themes and subjects are displayed and discussed, the museum institution, our society's custodian of historical artifacts, supports hegemonic rule. In the public mind, the museum is where history is kept; we agree that these public institutions represent us and can speak for us in matters of history and national identity. The very act of representing history in a building like a museum assigns significance to those events - an historical occurrence is raised from a first order meaning to mythic signification when it is depicted in a museum.

 Several key authors laid the groundwork for the discussion of power and authority and nationalism in museums. In his important work *The Birth of the Museum* (1995), Tony Bennett writes that museums were not just expressions of history or science as defined in the Enlightenment, but closely wrapped up in 19th century efforts to define nations. Bennett links the birth of museums to the rise of bourgeois culture and capitalism, and the need to present the dominant society and economic system as the correct way of being within a nation. He shows how public museums and galleries played an important role in the formation of the modern nation-state by acting as hegemonic educative and civilizing agencies to bring order to an unruly public. He further demonstrates how museum exhibitions embedded modern ideals of the 'universal history of civilization,' with European audiences positioned at the pinnacle of this march of history. Benedict Anderson's (1983) discussion of nation-states as imagined political communities details the use of museums as repositories and narrators of 'official nationalism' and symbols of those imagined communities. He envisions museums as tools for remembering and narrating national identity. Evans (1999) echoes this idea in her introduction to *Representing the Nation:* 'The point about "imagining" is that nations have to be imagined in a particular and selective style. [This style] achieves tangible and symbolic form through traditions, museums, monuments and ceremonies' (1999: 2). Sharon Macdonald (2003) also discusses the role of museums in establishing an imagined, sentimentalized nation, stressing the importance of this emotional underpinning. The sentimental idea of belonging to a group and experiencing an emotional identity with the group carries a greater charge and leads to a sense of passion and involvement that, Anderson points out,

commands a profound emotional legitimacy. The manipulation of this sense of belonging, this nationalism, could be seen as a great achievement of modern capitalism—the dominant society and economic system is legitimized through this non-rational emotional attachment. The dominant culture's economic and political interests are thus secured with the consent of the masses.

The Museum as Public Space

But while the museum is clearly seen as a hegemonic agent for the state, at the same time, the institution is also considered an important space in the public sphere for the discussion, construction and contestation of ideas. In Habermas' (2001) understanding of the public sphere, all members of society come together as a unified group to discuss ideas about the common good in an objective, rational manner. The museum fulfills this role by the nature of its scientific, objective stance on knowledge and its position as a public forum, theoretically accessible to all, where large numbers of people gather for events, programs and lectures. Charles Taylor (2002) sees the public sphere as an essential part of the modern 'social imaginary' where individuals come together to voice opinion in a public space that exists outside state power. In his view, the 'extrapolitical' status of the public sphere is essential so that ideas and opinions can be expressed outside of the state, and political power can be 'supervised and checked by something external…' (Taylor, 2002: 114).

The extrapolitical nature of the modern public sphere is key to our discussion of the role of the museum and the nature of the public sphere in which it operates, and where its conflicted nature becomes evident. If we are to accept the writings of theorists who demonstrate the integral place of the museum as a hegemonic agent of dominant culture, how can we reconcile this with the concept of the museum as a public forum disengaged from state power? The use of the medium of museums as a voice of the state is highly manipulative, and is a source of disaffection among non-dominant groups when they think about museums. Crooke (2004), for instance, cites the anxiety of Northern Irish communities who fear that local expression of heritage will be 'taken over' by state museums. African Canadians voice a discomfort in entering museums because of the overwhelming official presence (Ashley, 2004). Henry has written extensively on the case of the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto where a controversial exhibit, *Into the Heart of Africa*, caused outrage among some African-Canadians who interpreted the exhibit as a perpetuation of dominant culture racism (Henry, 1995). In these cases their fears relate to loss of control of and participation in the dialogue within the museum walls—the museum space is not theirs, it belongs to someone else. The museum is clearly not a public space equally accessible to all.

The traditional bourgeois concept of the public sphere implies the troubling assumption that the public sphere is *not* accessible to all. And, in order to participate in this space, any difference is cast aside in order to act in unity with the group (Fraser, 1993). The limited nature of the public sphere has been pointed out by many scholars who agree that Habermas' original notion excluded access on the basis of gender, race and other characteristics, and implied participation in a unity based on the characteristics of European white males. Thus the public sphere shares with the notion of state authority the issue of power — domination and exclusion are implied here too. So we can add another layer to the problem of authority in museums: not only does authority and domination exist in the use of the museum as a voice of the state, but this power of exclusion can creep into its alternative use as a public site of contestation and dialogue. The theme of exclusion runs through Stuart Hall's work, and is linked by most writers to the core values of nationalism: the state defines its identity through closure or exclusion and buys acceptance to this closure from those of its citizens who share some of its characteristics. Hall writes about the formation of identity, and the role of the nation-state in the creation of national identity. He points out how a nation-state is represented as homogenous and imagined as stretching back in time (Hall, 1996). To Hall, this homogeneity or unity which identity treats as natural, or an 'inevitable totality', is not natural, it is a constructed form of closure, constructed within the 'play of power and exclusion' (Hall, 1993: 5).

Within the museum world, the exoticization of Others and the exclusion of Others is a much-discussed issue from the colonial era and even survives now in post-colonial times.

Non-dominant players now ask that the post-colonial museum respond to criticisms of gender, class and racial exclusion by opening up and reflecting upon the process of representation. While admitted in theory, in practice some institutions and professionals have not even considered that the act of displaying is an act of power. Yet authority is exercised throughout the process of planning museum displays—what gets discussed at exhibit planning meetings, how the theme is framed and positioned, what media are used, which objects and visuals are shown or not shown, as well as how the content is expressed in written texts. In the post-modern museum all of these steps would be open to negotiation by many parties outside the mainstream.

How to open up the process of representation has been a source of constant debate in the museum community (for example Boswell & Evans, 1999; Carr, 2001; Clifford, 1997; Karp, Kreamer & Lavine, 1992; Sandell et al, 2002). It was Clifford (1997) who introduced the notion that the museum should move away from presentation with its implication of vested authority, towards multi-cultural exchange in a public space with community dialogue and ongoing construction of meaning. But essential to this move was the rejection of the ideas of authority and exclusion inherent not only in state representations but in participation in the public sphere. To accomplish this would have a major impact on how society sees itself and its heritage.

The State and Canadian Museums

The movement towards non-authoritative representation and inclusive participation has been only a recent concern for Canadian museums, indicative of the slow evolution of state policies in their articulation of nationalism and the imagining of community. Scientific collections formed the basis of early Canadian museums in the 19th century, as governments and universities responded to increased concern about the preservation of important scientific, anthropological and archaeological artifacts and knowledge. While scholarly interest was the primary focus, museums at that time were also the only medium through which citizens could get a sense of their own shared history, and the strange and exotic people and countries which lay beyond their personal experience. These early institutions offered an academic, disciplinary and Anglo-centred view of history and the world (Gillam, 2001).

Canada's Massey Report of 1951 was the first major policy document that closely scrutinized Canadian museums. It laid out the concern of the federal government with the Americanization of Canada, and sought to stem the tide through the support of arts and culture, and through an emphasis on universities and education. The report recommended that museums redefine their role from collecting and research to vehicles of adult education - education with the intent of achieving nationalist goals. Their language bore a striking resemblance to that of British Victorian museums that sought to 'civilize' the lower classes (see Bennett, 1995). It supported the creation of state facilities that would serve the express purpose of defining and presenting Canadian natural history and cultural history, beginning a trend of government agency and authority in the life of museums. Canada's centennial year in 1967 was the next defining moment in museum history when many local and provincial centres of identity were created to boost a sense of Canadian nationalism. Following this, the Trudeau/Pelletier policies of 'democratization and decentralization' saw the establishment of the National Museums of Canada and various travelling programs like the Museumobiles which depicted an imagined, romantic Canadian nation, and sought to unite the country in a unified, state-sponsored vision of heritage. National unity was a central feature of the political agenda in the following years, and by the late 1980s and early 1990s the battle between separatists and federalists in Quebec played out in its museums (Ruddel, 2004). Quebec developed the *Musée de la civilization* and other heritage facilities such as *la maison des patriotes* to tell patriotic *québéquois* political and social history narratives. On the federal side, the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) in Hull countered with a Canadian history hall that told an official, celebratory vision of the past. There, the story of Quebec was represented by a quaint, pre-conquest village; an imagined simulacra, with no mention here of difficult social issues in history such as the expulsion of the Acadians or the 1837-38 rebellion (Ruddel, 2004).

The nationalistic imagining of Canada was surprisingly monolithic outside of Quebec. Permanent exhibits in national, provincial and regional institutions reflected a similar mix of displays about Anglo settlement history. Until the 1970s the treatment of First Nations and non-Anglo cultures was either anthropological or non-existent. Canadian First Nations narratives were often isolated either in detached spaces within natural history museums, or in separate anthropological museums, effectively separating native collections and stories from mainstream representations of national narratives (Ruddel, 2004). But it was in the anthropological museum, and specifically dealing with First Nations issues, that museum practice in Canada began to change. In western Canada, museums like the Glenbow began to include some native input into programming, staffing and some exhibits as a response in many cases to native activism and a heightened public awareness of First Nations' social issues. As well, cultural pride and activism resulted in the creation, by First Nations groups, of museums specifically devoted to expressing indigenous perspectives on culture and heritage, such as the Woodland Cultural Centre of the Six Nations. By the 1990s, when ownership, protection and repatriation of indigenous cultural property became an international issue, some significant collaborations were undertaken in public museums both in Canada and other Western countries (see Haas, 1996; Phillips, 2003).

At this time, Canadian museums began to deal with another aspect of national culture that surfaced as an issue for Canadian society - ethnic diversity. International flows of people, money and information had stirred up a number of social issues in Canada and throughout the world. On a political level, the needs of immigrants to Canada were addressed through the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 that defined programs to support the symbolic cultures of new Canadians. But the integration of the heritage of minorities into actual museum programs and practices was more challenging. Indigenous peoples and diasporic minorities are two very different categories in Canada, and have been dealt with differently in Canadian museums. A basic technical problem is that while material objects relating to First Nations are available in abundance in most museums, rarely are there any collections connected to ethnic communities in Canada. On the level of public opinion, First Nations' rights are officially acknowledged in the Canadian Charter, and they have a sympathetic place in the minds of average Canadians since they were the 'first' Canadians. New Canadians however, especially 'visible minorities', have a different place in the Canadian imagination (Bannerji, 2000), and their inclusion in museum representations and institutional practices has been problematic. Following the lead of many Western museums, the Canadian Museums Association encouraged its members to fundamentally question their values, assumptions and purpose in society, and to consider the inclusion of more diverse voices in all aspects of museum practice. But translating the professional interest into structural change and a more inclusive imagining of Canadian-ness on the institutional level has been slow. At the Canadian Museum of Civilization, for example, ethnic diversities are still represented in permanent collections by a vision of managed multiculturalism— a Chinese laundry and a Ukrainian church are all that contribute to the overall, progressive national story that omits troubling issues. A more significant example of myopic vision was the *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit of 1989-90 which became the most controversial show in the history of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), and a touchstone in the Canadian imagination for future museum exhibits about minority groups. Vocal and violent objections emerged from divergent readings of that exhibit, which told the story of 19th century collecting by Canadians in Africa to address colonial attitudes and interpret histories of minority groups not previously exhibited. African-Canadians protested that the exhibit presented instead a story of white people in Africa, and perpetuated racism through its texts and visuals. They blamed a lack of consultation by the ROM and its curator. The ROM responded defensively against what they saw as interference in curatorial professionalism, independence and academic freedom - what others saw as inherent white privileges (Tator, 2000). Instead of taking the opportunity to interact with current and historic social issues in the museum forum, either through planning consultation, by representing the complexity of the subject in the exhibit itself or by other means, the contestation had to take place on the street outside the museum walls.

In the late 1990s the Canadian government initiated a significant policy shift that opened the door for more diverse imagining of Canadian stories, and, to borrow from Stephen

Weil (1999), the re-positioning of heritage institutions away from being *about* unity and nationalism and being *for* its citizens. Canadian arts, culture and museums were framed instead as social goods that supported cohesion in society. At this time, preliminary efforts to collaborate with Canadian ethnic communities to develop exhibitions were undertaken, for example at the CMC (Phillips, 2003). The primary federal department responsible for articulating nationalism/unity since the mid-1990s was Canadian Heritage, the umbrella department for arts, culture, heritage and multicultural programs on the federal level. When this department's mission and objectives were re-aligned in 2001 away from talk of identity and nationalism, and into 'social cohesion', the resulting departmental mission statement became 'towards a more cohesive and creative Canada.' The parlance in the policy planning context became: how can Canadians, including new ethnic Canadians, make a social investment or acquire social capital through participation in cultural/heritage programs? The strategic policy objectives responding to these questions named four essential elements of cohesion that Canadians should share and support: connections; stories and symbols; inclusion and participation; and values.

Unity or Cohesion?

While federal policy researchers defined social cohesion as 'how to build a sense of connectedness and belonging in Canadian society' (Baeker, 2002), the idea suffers from the underlying suspicion that we were again discussing issues of power - that social cohesion was a means of nationalism or unification or assimilation that did not resolve the social issues of inequality or exclusion. In fact, the Canadian government's Final Report of Social Cohesion in 1999 warned that the concept of social cohesion does not convey the same awareness of exclusion or inequity as policy concerns like 'social justice'. The report pointed out the tendency to confuse social cohesion with national unity and concluded that these fuzzy ideas of 'shared values and traditions' should not be allowed to overshadow ongoing challenges associated with social justice (Canada, 1999). Supporters maintain that cohesion is an internal sharing and bonding of diverse participants in society that brings a sense of mutual aid and passion once devoted to nationalism. Critics contend that cohesion is an external imposition of unity in order to ensure authority and social control. Bannerji (2000) asserts that Canadian federal multiculturalism language and policies still serve white elitist goals rather than the interests of visible minorities. She writes that non-whites might be citizens but they do not 'belong' in the imagining of the nation. Henry (2002) points out that social cohesion policies rely on concepts of tolerance and unity within a paradigm of diversity that presumes that justice and equality exist in Canada. She maintains that these policies only address symbolic not transformative change. Baeker (2002) also cautions that cohesion policies must do more than offer surface change, and points out that the use of what he calls 'affirmative' strategies try to correct inequitable social arrangements without disturbing underlying and generative structures or frameworks. Bernard (1999) calls this the formal aspects of cohesion that are state-driven and passive and tend to be framed in words like 'shared values' and 'tolerance.' Such words imply that a paternalistic national culture is bestowing inclusion upon the minority cultures, or that visible minorities are now being asked to participate in the culture of their superiors. He maintains that official versions of cohesion merely mask growing social inequalities, and are very different from what he calls the Substantial day-to-day aspects of cohesion such as social justice, active participation and real dialogue about values.

Is social cohesion a new term for assimilation or social control, or are we now at the point where these Canadian Heritage objectives mean true equality and sharing of power? What would Canadian museums need to do, on the ground, to develop cohesive policies and practices in a truly equitable manner, to step back from their position as arbiters of content, and develop as accessible public forums? Cohesion must be seen as a social force that goes beyond official or formal identity, and incorporates substantive change, a definition that straddles and incorporates the two positions of 'state authority' and 'public forum'. An essential element lies in seeing these two positions as a communicative dialectic. The concept of authority implies, on one hand, a communicative effect that is top-down, official,

unitary, symbolic and one-way or transmissive. The concept of public forum on the other hand, suggests a communicative effect that is horizontal or multi-level, everyday, complex, constructivist and two-way or dialogic. It is possible to relate the concepts of 'state authority' and 'public space' to the 'formal' and 'substantial' of Bernard's analysis. The formal level of cohesion carries with it the authoritative power of the state with its symbolic and transmissive characteristics. The substantial level imparts the give-and-take life of citizens participating in the constructivist dialogues of the everyday. In a truly cohesive society, museums would act as part of the social process of citizenship where all citizens encounter and interact with heritage on both formal/symbolic and substantial/everyday levels. As state institutions, they have a monopoly or the power to formally define citizen membership through representation - but definitions become fixed in the process of exhibition. The fluidity of the substantial sphere of participation, interaction and contestation is essential to respond to and overcome that fixation.

Much of the recent museological literature about concrete attempts to make museum practices more inclusive on both formal and substantial levels stress two methods: deep structural and policy change, and collaboration (for example Baeker, 2002, Phillips 2003, Sandell 2002). Many museums have, internationally, taken on this challenge, especially in the UK where social inclusion is a major government policy initiative. Macdonald (2003) cites the study of a museum in Bradford, England that redesigned its Transcultural Gallery. There an East Indian curator integrated various ethnic communities in selecting the objects for display, defining local narratives, and encouraged connections between groups. Macdonald offers the strategy of 'leaving objects to speak for themselves' as key to opening up how identities are represented. Crooke (2004) describes how museums in Northern Ireland are building their exhibits from the bottom-up in an attempt to include all. She points out that no overarching national narrative was ever offered in museums because of 'the troubles' and conflicting imaginings of Northern Ireland's history. Instead, museums there are beginning to serve as grassroots spaces for sharing private memories and stories - a multiplicity of versions of history offered in the public sphere with the intent of community building. Whether non-white minorities will be invited to share this space is an unanswered question. Sandell (1998) discusses nation-wide organizational changes in British museums that would enhance the inclusivity of their programs. While the overall approach recommends deep structural change, the process itself seems to exclude people in poverty from the structural analysis, seemingly reinforcing a hegemonic stance in which insiders decide what is right for disadvantaged people. Despite their limitations, all three examples demonstrate that some museums are willing to share authority in the process of conceptualizing and presenting heritage, using both collaborative and organizational methods.

Canadian Museums and Social Cohesion

Some Canadian museums have stepped away from authoritative practices and have tried to initiate policies, operations and programming that integrate both formal and substantial cohesion. This has been especially successful in attempts to feature First Nations' perspectives in the national narrative. Examples of First Nations collaborations, and the integration of First Nations managers and staff, exist throughout the Canadian museum world (see Phillips, 2003). The First Peoples Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, for instance, was opened in 2003 at the Canadian Museum of Civilization after an 11-year process of collaboration. A sharing of management and curatorial power between aboriginal and CMC participants resulted in a unique exhibition that juxtaposes standard ethnographic treatment and First Nations' perspectives on living cultures. But examples of significant participation of ethnic communities, not First Nations, in Canadian museums are more difficult to find. Oral histories and projects such as community mapping related to multicultural communities, as well as outreach programs and travelling exhibits developed with community input on diversity topics can be found in museums of all sizes. But notable expenditures or changes to institutional structure to incorporate visible minorities have not been documented. One institution that has devoted resources to changing its relationship to minority citizens is Canada's National Historic Sites. Their recent exhibit, *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop*

Freedom, tested the process of collaboration and led to a re-orientation of priorities and approaches within the agency. A closer look at the process of planning this exhibit, undertaken over a three-year period, illustrates how changes on both formal and informal levels are required for a true paradigm shift in this social institution.

The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom

The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Freedom (UGRR) was installed at the Royal Ontario Museum from 2002-3, and is currently on view at the Black Creek Pioneer Village in Toronto. The show is a multi-media exhibition that interprets the story of the escape of many Black slaves from the U.S. into Canada through the early 1800s, and the urban experience of these Underground Railroad settlers in Toronto. The history of the exhibit's development illustrates how this federal heritage agency, under the Department of Canadian Heritage, was obliged to confront the substantive issues of participation and belonging, with the potential of contributing in a small way to the long-term issue of equality. The department was dragged into this position by the U.S. government through its National Parks Service, who, in 1997, requested the participation of Canadian Heritage in increasing the number of UGRR-related museums and historic sites in the U.S. and Canada. Their aim was to correct a perceived imbalance of African-American stories in American cultural institutions. Since Canada was the destination for UGRR refugees, Canadian Heritage, through the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board (NHSMB) and the Board's operational agency, National Historic Sites (NHS), was asked to join the network of institutions interpreting this story. In December 1998, NHSMB recommended designation of several new national historic sites and persons of national historic significance to commemorate the Underground Railroad in Canada. One specific recommendation addressed the need for a presentation in Toronto on UGRR urban settlers. Subsequently, Historic Sites historians and project staff took on the planning of an exhibit, something they were accustomed to doing. But in their efforts to ensure a product that would not receive public condemnation, they asked key stakeholders to sit on a consultative committee that would direct the production of the exhibit - African-Canadians were invited to sit at the table. This was an unprecedented move for the agency, a direct result of the violent reaction to ROM's *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit (Watt, personal comment, 2004).

The invitation to the consultative committee to have substantive input into the end product took the exhibit beyond the traditional Canadian exhibit form and into an evolutionary hybrid. The production moved from being a controlled, in-house representational project, to a very public project with great symbolic meaning to the minority group it depicted. The original intent of the NHSMB was undoubtedly a formal commemoration of an event that would show Canada as a liberal nation that rescued slaves. What evolved in this production was a very real and very precarious relationship of power as the project became politicized and its claim to authenticity became a thing of negotiation. The dynamic of the consultative committee forced NHS to address the new social cohesion objectives of the department—on both formal and substantial levels. The process removed the heavy hand of official state interpretation and presented a point of view that was human, rooted in the everyday and offering a face-to-face negotiation of national narrative both for the producers and the audience. The project entered the public sphere not as the authoritative work of a particular museum, but as a collaborative dialogue between a range of minority stakeholders, and in a broader sense initiated agency-wide deep structural and policy changes.

Siting the exhibit, researching and framing the story, selecting media and exhibit materials, consulting with related Black history sites in other locations, and maintaining relations with the African and Caribbean communities in Toronto emerged as areas of particular concern to the consultative committee (NHS, 1999 - 2002). Their first task was to find an appropriate site for the exhibition, and the Royal Ontario Museum was the only suitable space available - a choice that did not sit comfortably with several committee members. From the beginning, the *Into the Heart of Africa* exhibit loomed in their discussions. Both government representatives and 'civilian' committee members trod carefully around subjects related to 'the ROM's past record' (1 December, 2000). When it was discovered that the museum had offered a small, basement location, one member refused to accept the site (27 October, 2000)

and commented how this symbolically placed them 'in the back of the bus again.' After intense negotiation, an invitation for a ROM representative to sit on their committee and letter writing to political supporters, they compromised on additional square footage at the museum and a series of satellite messaging sites.

Committee minutes reveal some of the collaborative dynamic in which the heritage professionals ceded power to the committee at large. The Underground Railroad was an entirely new subject matter for NHS, and unlike most aspects of Canadian history and prehistory, the agency had little internal expertise. This was an advantage since there were no preconceived notions of white expertise, and it allowed the committee to take a fresh approach. They hired several African-Canadian historians (one of whom was involved in the *Into the Heart of Africa* protests) to undertake original and secondary historical research (Watt, 2004). The committee members themselves and their extended communities were also seen as sources of knowledge for stories, artifacts, and photos. How to frame the story was also a source of contention: was it to be a social and political history featuring the hardships of slavery that implicated Canada as a slave-owning nation, or was it to be a celebration of the accomplishments of the refugees when they arrived in Toronto? The committee was divided, but settled on a celebratory tone. Some might call this a false harmony, but the decision was born of the committee's desire to counter the myth that Blacks were victims (Canada, 2000). They also wanted to assert through this public medium that African-Canadians and their history had achieved status in Canadian society. They developed a specific planning objective that the presentation, 'instill in audiences a sense of personal connection to the stories of Black immigrants and refugees' (2000: 14). Preliminary studies of audience reaction undertaken in 2003 reveal that the exhibit engendered not only a recognition of the specific history of a minority group, but a recognition that the story told was one involving all Canadians (Ashley, 2004*).* Whether this implied that audiences were ignoring the narrator's 'otherness' and appropriating her story as the 'same' as theirs, or instead recognized the intrinsic inequality of this minority history, is a subject for further study. But the group hoped to sensitize audiences to the Black experience and affirm their history as an integral part of Canadian national identity.

The consultative committee pushed for a non-typical museum exhibition technique — a story-telling mode with a holographic female narrator in a dramatic theatre setting. It is interesting to see how the exhibit approach originally taken by consultants — with panels, artifacts and graphics reflecting the NHS's Western museological approach — did not sit well with the group and was reworked over the course of the project to arrive at the final object theatre. The team wanted to shift the making of meaning from a didactic representation of standard historical information to the affective telling of an individual's story. Audiences were not presented with knowledge so much as experience, dangerous in its potential to alienate some audience members. Indeed, some visitors reacted to the presentation with the question, 'where is the "real" exhibit?' (Ashley, 2004). But to clearly indicate that this exhibition was their point of view, the committee members, the researchers and the consultative process were fully acknowledged at the entrance to the theatre, an admission of authorship and dialogic process, as well as, undoubtedly, a confirmation of the internal politics of the committee. And, while the first-person, multimedia heritage approach was criticized by some as promoting a synchronous, populist past to nostalgic audiences (for example Hodgins, 2004), preliminary audience research has indicated that the public (children and adults of many ethnicities) were willing to sit through this 25-minute presentation and invest in it intellectually and emotionally (Ashley, 2004).

The collaborative approach brought new voices into decision-making for this exhibit, installed a new type of media at the 'stodgy' ROM, and resulted in strong networking with other African-Canadian museum workers, heritage sites and members of the diverse Black community of Toronto. From the outset, the team felt that the collaboration had a broader educative function, derived more from the process not just the final product. A process to identify, research and commemorate a range of 'satellite' sites across Toronto, and to relate the Toronto exhibit to Black history sites in Ontario, was seen as essential to the planning process (NHS, 6 July, 2001). This also included drawing Toronto's African-Canadian community into the exhibit at all stages from planning; to creative design, scripting, music and

visuals; to ancillary programming; to coming to see the show. The committee room became a neutral meeting place where a diverse group of African-Canadians, some of whom had been here for generations and some of whom were born on another continent, could assemble and share experiences, work together, disagree, come up with solutions and find a vision to present to other Canadians.

On a deep organizational and policy level, the UGRR project propelled both formal and substantial changes. To undertake the terms of the designation, NHS was compelled to draw active input from a range of minority stakeholders both on the committee and within a network of communities in Ontario. This led to a re-assessment of their internal practices of planning and designations on the policy level, contributing to a reassessment of the agency's System Plan (which sets thematic criteria for commemorations) and a new agency-wide emphasis on 'ethno-cultural communities' (NHS, 1 December, 2000). A specific result of the project was the continued employment of several African-Canadian historians to work on this and other projects. The agency also integrated Canadian government-wide equity hiring procedures which promoted the hiring of First Nations and 'visible minority' candidates, for example the hiring of an African-Canadian superintendent at a NHS military historic site (Watt, 2004). But efforts to ensure diversity and inclusion have not yet permeated the system at individual museums and sites to a great extent, other than through individual projects, interpretive programs, and at new sites specifically devoted to minority histories. It is easier for NHS to change the way they do business and meet cohesion objectives on small, semi-independent projects and programs than on the basis of a deep structural change. Whether changes initiated by the UGRR exhibit will gain momentum agency-wide in the coming years is a subject for future longitudinal research.

State Authority and the Public Sphere

This paper argues that Canada's museums, as supporters of equality, must view the world as an ongoing construction in a dialogue among participants. Substantial cohesion in all its dimensions - social, economic and political - involves an admission that our world can be constructed by all. Whether this has permeated the outlook of practitioners in Canadian museums is an ongoing question. The idea of the museum as authority and state agent in representing unitary narratives of the past has been discredited in theory but only slowly undermined in practice. Elite ways of looking at heritage, and practices that reflect unitary ideologies continue at all levels.

Some critics see the abandonment of the grand narrative and its replacement by multiple narratives of minorities or populist representations of ordinary people as another form of tyranny. Instead of the public depicted as uniform citizens, it becomes individuals and communities of difference that are isolated, depoliticized and made digestible for mass consumption (Hodgins, 2004). Others voice the danger that in favouring new or minority perspectives museums might trade 'one set of exclusionary practices for another' (Phillips, 2003:165), as old audiences and practitioners are cut out of the process of communication in an effort to overcompensate for past domination.

But small measures such as the Underground Railroad exhibit can point to future directions. The success of the UGRR exhibit with visitors is the *perception* of dialogue: that the presentation was clearly developed as a result of dialogue and that reaction to it can be a thing of dialogue. This was unusual in Canada where museums have traditionally acted as state agents of national culture, rather than spaces for the contestation of state authority. National Historic Sites was an agency where state control normally dictated an official message, usually a dominant-culture narrative. The idea of inviting participation, dialogue, involvement and the construction of community, all essential elements of true social cohesion, would suggest that agencies like NHS are beginning to turn away from statist or elitist points of view towards serving a non-exclusive public sphere. Projects such as the UGRR exhibit demonstrate that museum policies and methodologies have the potential to be egalitarian and cohesive, and in the long term will result in a negotiated view of Canadian identity. The key in this case was the removal of an authoritative voice and its functioning as one voice among many. Those voices, offering their own version of history, admitted their

authorship, their own interpretation, thus offered up to audiences a choice of reactions - much like any conversation among equals or discourse in the public sphere. It reinforces the idea that the museum does not need only to focus on representation and exhibition - acting 'in public', but can serve as meeting place or community centre - acting 'of the public'.

Hilde Hein's (2000) thoughtful conclusion to her philosophic book on museums focuses on the dilemma that post-modern museums have 'descended from the heaven of authoritative certainty' (2000: 142) and are now consumed with doubt about their role in the world. The need to reinvent themselves has brought 'progressively more uniformity as museums hedge their bets by covering all possibilities' (Hein, 2000:142). She is concerned about the desire to manipulate and control the visitor's experience and laments the loss of the selective, individual, haphazard viewing experience that involved personal relationships with the objects. She writes, 'the challenge facing contemporary museums, therefore, is not to seal themselves off from multiplicity, nor to unify and sanitize it, but to invest its complexity with moral breadth, cognitive significance, and aesthetic pleasure' (Hein, 2000: 148). Carr (2001) sees the answer as recognizing the museum as 'an open work' and he writes, 'to see the museum as an open work is to recognize that it is always discovered by its users in an unfinished state, not unlike seeing it as a laboratory, or a workshop for cognitive change' (2001: 182). Both writers echo the same challenge: the museum must be more open to ways that will temper the authoritative agency and certainty; remove homogeneity and single points of view, reject exclusion, encourage complexity and pluralism, and ensure conversation, dialogue and true cohesion.

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INTERVIEW
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