

The Predicament of Representation in the Politics of Diversity: A Discussion through Tate Encounters

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Abstract

Considering the recognition by Arts Council England that cultural diversity within national museums and cultural organizations is 'treading water', the article proposes a typology of the criticisms available before putting forward the hypothesis that, no matter how legitimate those criticisms are, most of them are underpinned by an essentialist concept of representation. In order to test this hypothesis, it discusses Tate Encounters, a research project carried out at Tate Britain from 2007 to 2010, as a case study at the intersections of cultural policy and museology, visitor studies and audience engagement. The project provides a situated and multitextured account of the limitations restricting cultural diversity policy. However, it also demonstrates the difficulties in attempting to overcome those limitations – what I call 'the predicament of representation'. Building upon a post-structuralist perspective, the article understands that, since we cannot escape from representing and being represented, a non-essentialist conception of representation has to be put into practice.

Key words: Tate Encounters, cultural diversity policy, politics of representation, multiculturalism, migrant audiences

A Starting Point

Following the publication of the Macpherson report (into the murder of Stephen Lawrence) in 1999 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act in 2000,¹ the attempt to eradicate racial prejudice within national museums and cultural organizations made Arts Council England (ACE) require a diversity strategy from these institutions as a condition of funding. 20 years later, the annual report on diversity within the arts sector released in February 2019, this time examining the make-up of the workforce, shows that – with the exception of gender diversity – arts organizations are 'still treading water'.² Why is this the case and what are the ways forward?

The explanations for the outcome may vary. But let us first notice what the document means by 'diversity'. In the report, the term stands for the aim to have, across organizations of the National Portfolio (NPOs) and Major Partner Museums (MPMs), the same percentages of women, Black and minority ethnic (BME), LGBTQ+ and disabled people that can be found across England's working age population. The four segments are part of the 'protected characteristics' defined in the Equality Act 2010. The data shows that BME and disabled people remain under-represented across the workforce and leadership of the sector. There has been a slight 'improvement', an increase from 1 to 3 per cent in BME representation within organizations. However, with 12 per cent at NPOs and 5 per cent at MPMs, the proportions remain significantly lower than the 16 per cent within the working population. In the case of disabled people, with 5 per cent of the workforce at NPOs and 4 at MPMs, the proportion is even lower than the 20 per cent of disabled people of working age. Concerning sexual orientation, the data remain significantly unknown according to the report. Audiences were only reported in terms of socioeconomic profile and, as such, remained almost identical year upon year.

Thus, one could barely say the policy addresses racial prejudice or other forms of discrimination, as the report is simply concerned with administrative conditions for statistical equality. Referring to the aims of the policy, Nicholas Serota, then chair of ACE, assured that 'a young and increasingly diverse population will aim to be at the leading edge of new forms of economic activity; and [...] the ways in which we live and work will rely ever more on creative thinking and solutions'.³ Certainly, economic and social interests do not necessarily exclude each other, although economic growth does not lead inevitably to social justice. Similarly, the appointment of diverse people to leading positions might be a means to promote change,⁴ albeit creative thinking does not necessarily tackle discrimination. Serota recognizes that 'the scale of change we want to achieve will take time'. Indeed he seems more willing to imagine a future than scrutinizing a long-standing historical problem. He is confident that 'success will come when change in the composition of the workforce feeds through to the leadership'. The point is that, if change is coming, it is doing so very sluggishly.

The State of Criticism in Relation to Representation

The report sparked debates at national level. For Madani Younis, then creative director of Southbank Centre, the arts sector is suffering from a 'new paternalism' that 'allows institutions to co-opt the concerns of diversity [...] [and] to decide what the pace of change is'.⁵ For Clive Nwonka, then fellow in film studies at the London School of Economics, 'a combination of industries placing economic interests over social interests, resistance and disinterest from stakeholders, and poorly conceptualised initiatives left diversity in the wilderness'.⁶ Yet these debates are not new; neither are their widely shared conclusion. Considering that reports on 'cultural diversity' have been produced in the UK since the late 1970s (from Khan 1976 to Hylton 2007), the art critic Jean Fisher (2010: 64) – quoting Richard Hylton's *The Nature of the Beast* – acknowledged that 'institutional cultural diversity initiatives [...] have not fundamentally altered the *qualitative* structure of the system'. My hypothesis is that, no matter how legitimate the available criticisms are – and they substantially are legitimate – most of them eventually overlook an important aspect of the problem, for they rely in different ways upon an essentialist view of representation.

Although it fundamentally results from socio-political pressures, 'cultural diversity' in its administrative form has widely differing interpretations. It is not my purpose to exhaust them, but I would suggest there are three major readings of the problem.⁷ The first one agrees that cultural diversity policies are somehow well-intentioned, that they comprise initiatives to broaden inclusiveness, that they are a basis for progressive engagement. It does not question the terms of inclusion and representation; it just presses for greater inclusion and wider representativeness. It points out the missing histories, the silenced voices; it claims that the marginalized must occupy the mainstream. The second asserts that diversity policies are rhetorical, that they comprise tokenistic initiatives, that they only promote cosmetic changes. It contends with the instrumentalization of those the policies purport to benefit; it asserts that they mask the struggle between equality and exclusivity, in order to protect the (ultimately white) privilege of the core values. Its assessment of representation can be more ambiguous. On the one hand, it demands that a more complete version of historical truth be told, that our full humanity be represented. On the other, it suggests they cannot reach the real experiences of ethnic minorities. Finally, the third more clearly denounces the injurious effects of such policies, their focus on the strains of separation between 'mainstream' and 'marginal' cultures, how they produce ethnic ghettos and place subjectivities in a straightjacket of conformity. Where the second sees assimilation, the third sees blatant exclusion. The solution it coherently proposes is the suppression of the representational approach, since categorization leads inevitably to racialization.

Indeed my purpose is not to account for the whole dataset of criticisms. Several 'priorities' will be at play here: the article discusses 'diversity' instead of 'decolonization'; 'BME' people, not the intersections between the four 'characteristics'; the predicament of representation instead of the complexities of reciprocity; a case study embedded within an art museum, not in another kind of institution; the agency of audiences instead of employment or artistic programming.⁸ Thus, the blind spots will be numerous (and sometimes covered by the use of

metonymy), but this is part of the problem I want to address. My provisional recommendation, paraphrasing art historian Leon Wainwright (2010: 103), is that we move contingently as well as in conflict with representation, until its predicament is made clear. The typology proposed above does not suggest a hierarchy between those interpretations, in terms of their criticality. We cannot deem the first one to be uncritical, without considering 'positive discrimination' as a possible juncture in the negotiation with institutional racism. On the other side, dispensing with the 'burden of representation',⁹ as well as advocating self-representation, cannot be simply deemed more critical, if we do not accede to the challenge facing representation.¹⁰ The three readings I summarized have something in common: although quite differently, they all regard representation as the recognition of discrete identities. In other words, they (or at least the two former) regard it as something that essentializes, simplifies, fixes. The point is that such a position is itself underpinned by a fixed notion of representation.

Building upon a post-structuralist perspective, my basic argument is that the problem of diversity, recognition and equality involves the unfolding of 'representation' as a changing and dynamic conception, since it is the very process by which identities (and differences) are articulated, negotiated and established, in which they become visible and contested, made effective or redundant. That problem is not solved but opened up when we call for a more complex politics of cultural representation. And since we cannot escape from representing and being represented, especially if we want to emphasize the importance of speaking to each other, rather than speaking for each other (Mercer 1994 [1990]: 251), a non-essentialist conception of representation – subject to 'an endless process of deferral' – has to be put into practice. This is not to neglect that representations are invested with particular meanings, resulting from '*specific operations of signification*' (Brah 1996: 241). However, putting that into practice requires more than a critical gesture; to begin with, it requires bridging the gap between critics and practitioners.

In order to test my hypothesis, I will discuss Tate Encounters as a case study at the intersections of cultural policy and museology, and then between visitor studies and audience engagement. The post-critical position developed by the research project brought together academics and museum professionals in order to consider, among other issues, what the agency of the audiences means for everyday work in the art museum. Thanks to its radically empirical and critically reflexive approach, the project was able to make sense of the complexities intertwining policy and practice on the ground, from a bottom-up perspective. For the purpose of this article, the project provides a situated and multitextured account – which is still far too infrequent – of the limitations restricting cultural diversity policy. However, it also demonstrates the difficulties in attempting to overcome those limitations.

Challenging the Politics of Diversity (and its Discontents)

Ten years before the ACE report, a research project called 'Tate Encounters: Britishness and the Visual Culture', carried out at Tate Britain between 2007 and 2010, reached a similar conclusion about the 'steadiness' of cultural diversity policy in the UK. However, the project did not suggest the policy was on the right path and just needed more time to improve diversity statistics in museum attendance. It concluded that the policy was destined to fail from the outset, as it relied on 'a conception of cultural practices based upon a politics of representation' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 13). In the project's resulting publication, *Post-critical Museology: Theory and Practice in the Art Museum*, Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa and Victoria Walsh argued that such politics were inextricably tied to targeting measures and hence failed to match contemporary identities. In other words, the very attempt to address those 'missing audiences' failed to recognize them. As the investigators explain, those measures 'not only instrumentalized groups of people, but also essentialized them on the basis of racialized and ethnicized categories' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 122). More importantly, the research found that 'such targeting on the basis of BME categorization was resisted and ultimately rejected by student participants as a basis for defining identities' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 122). It is clear that the participants rejected being misrecognized, but did they reject being recognized anyway?

Other factors may have led to the failure of the policy and help us to understand the context in which the participants' rejection was played out. The project argued that, rather

than a real commitment to cultural diversity, 'the retention of identity politics is a residual and defensive "left/liberal" response to the crisis of the representational system as a whole' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 13). According to the investigators, the failure of such 'cultural welfarism' to engage with difference is reinforced by the reproduction, on the part of the museum, of an aesthetic modernism which is 'predicated on a universal subjective experience of the art object' and, for this reason, 'resists, contains and limits the conditions as well as experience of the social reception of art' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 12, 56, 66). Even worse, the practices aimed at increasing equality and diversity were deliberately used 'to contain and manage the risk of external challenge to the core' (Dewdney *et al.* 2010: 82). They served the entrenchment of the museum in its own identity, by functioning as 'institutional enclaves and narrow channels of communication cut off from larger networks of both private and public extension' (Dewdney *et al.* 2010: 86). As the project concluded, there are many reasons why the politics of representation would have come to an end, 'all of which result in the newer recognition that the Internet as well as newer, globalised forms of migration, have radically changed the relations of communities to the idea of nation' (Dewdney *et al.* 2010: 89).

As we see, the positionality of Tate Encounters, in terms of its criticism, would oscillate between the second and the third kinds of reading outlined in the previous section – although its assessment of a historically dominant system of representation would more clearly stick to the third one. In this sense, the project joins a series of critiques of state multiculturalism by minority perspectives, for whom the notion has been stripped of its anti-racist roots since the 1970s. Such multiculturalism has turned racism into an issue of 'ethnic disadvantage' that allegedly could be solved by 'targeting problem groups rather than addressing the racial hierarchies structuring British society and institutions' (Chin 2017: 266-7). Other (representational) problems pinpointed by those critiques are: (a) the sometimes divisive character of multiculturalism, when state funds are distributed on the basis of specific ethnic needs, fostering rivalries between minority communities; (b) the practice of relying on unelected ethnic representatives – who sometimes are the most conservative community leaders – in order to identify projects for funding, disregarding the variegated and conflicting needs of such communities; (c) the constitutive dimension of policies which, instead of acknowledging a diversity of needs, ended up imposing identities on diverse urban populations, based upon assumptions that minority groups were uniform and single-minded (Chin 2017: 265-70).

Needless to say, neither those critiques nor Tate Encounters intended to throw anti-racism out with the bathwater of multiculturalism. On the contrary, they wanted to radicalize that remit against rhetorical initiatives of institutional diversity, in favour of structural transformations and expanded notions of British belonging. However, the project joined them in a moment when 'the duty to integrate' was achieving a general consensus between liberals and conservatives on the failure of multiculturalism for supposedly having allowed extremism to grow unchecked within British society. This introduces another criterion for distinguishing between different criticisms, whose solutions for the problem are quite disparate. In her recollection of the crisis of multiculturalism in Europe, historian Rita Chin (2017: 280-1) at a certain point highlights the position adopted by Tony Blair after the 2005 bombings: 'he made clear that no social blueprint for multiculturalism – be it recognition of cultural differences, granting of minority rights, or laissez-faire coexistence – should take precedence over the full acceptance of British common values'. According to Chin, by 2010, the idea that multiculturalism had failed appeared so self-evident in Europe that national heads of state (particularly in France, Germany and the UK) felt comfortable to declare such failure without qualifications or caveats. Specifically in the UK, this marks the fading of left/liberal values represented by Labour governments towards increasing nationalism, and the wider rejection of both 'globalization' and 'progressive neoliberalism' (Fraser 2016). Once again, migration cultures were openly seen as a disturbance. At this point, dispensing with representation should be reconsidered. Certainly, it does not mean to revive an authoritative system of representation, let alone a misleading diversification of hierarchy. However, the defeat of what progressives used to criticize – ultimately as a demonstration of general support – by some crafty rightwing agenda seems to have precipitated criticism itself into a crisis.

Rethinking Representation

In a recent interview titled 'Still No Black in the Union Jack?', rather than simply claiming the representation of blackness within Britishness, Paul Gilroy articulates the interactions between black culture and national identity in relation to latest events.¹¹ According to Gilroy, prior to Brexit, 'the dream of *The Black Atlantic* [his book published in 1993] [of a rootless cosmopolitanism] died with the re-emergence of African-American music [after the September 11 attacks] at the core of US military and cultural diplomacy'. He also comments on his similarly titled book, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, published in 1987, in which he explores the role of racism across the right and left of the political spectrum: 'At that point I couldn't see clearly how much the culture of militarisation built up under New Labour [after the 2005 bombings] would pump in to fill the vacuum inside English national identity'. My emphasis, however, goes to his caustic answer, when asked about the prominence of leading Black politicians in the debates on the Grenfell fire: 'The arrival of black and brown politicians guarantees absolutely nothing'. Gilroy's thinking on the crisis of 'race' (and raciology) helps us to grasp his position here (Gilroy 2000: 11-53), but this suggests that the demands for greater representativeness certainly need to confront themselves with the crisis of the representational system. In contrast, however, it is opportune to bring on board his former reflections on the gaps between subjectivities (as the languages of the self), the notion of identity (as something supposedly shared) and the political struggle (as a process built upon conflict and solidarity), particularly his thoughts on the problem of intersubjectivity, in which the other can be recognized as part of the self. By drawing on the work of anthropologist Debora Battaglia, Gilroy understands that the 'self' can only appear as *a moment in the dialogic circuits* she called a 'representational economy', i.e. 'a reification continually defeated by mutable entanglements with other subjects' histories, experiences, self-representations' (Gilroy 2000: 109-10). In this account, representation is a 'collaborative practice of figuration', an 'ongoing process of [...] social interaction'.

A similar perspective – perhaps closer to the predicament I want to consider – is provided by political scientist Lasse Thomassen (2017), for whom there is no identity without difference, as well as no inclusion without exclusion. Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, he advocates that both identity and inclusion should be studied as the results of hegemonic struggles over representations. For the author, representations are simultaneously constative and performative, besides discursively constructed. In Gordon Brown's discourse, for instance, Britishness would be particularly rendered as a response to basically three specific developments: (a) Scottish devolution and the rise of Scottish nationalism; (b) multiculturalism as framed by the Muslim question (i.e. Islamophobia); and (c) the rise of a supposedly post-ideological Britain beyond the 'old' politics of Left and Right (Thomassen 2017: ch. 1). What is articulated by such discourse is *an alternative to* other representations of Britishness, rather than – as if this were possible – a 'presentational' (self-evident) reality in opposition to false or distorted misrepresentations. In this account, representation cannot be dismissed. Identity and inclusion, as well as difference and exclusion, can only be made visible, i.e. show up in the 'world in common' (Arendt 1998), by means of some representation, even though it will be continually contested by other (more or less complex, more or less reductive) representations. The same applies to 'the real experiences of ethnic minorities'. The point is how not to reduce visibility to sheer appearance, i.e. to a speech without action which is hence easily tokenized.

Tate Encounters' investigators refer to the representational system as a complex assemblage of variable elements – 'the production of knowledge, institutions, modes of communication and the conduct of politics' – united by 'a subject/object dualism in which one thing – idea, sign or person – can stand-in for or represent another'. In this account, representation ensures 'the stability of the existing order and relationship between people and things' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 4). Ultimately, the concept is ballasted with ideas of tradition and authority originating in the European Enlightenment and continually developed and disseminated through colonialism and Western dominance. As such, it should definitely be called into question. However, the crisis of such a system – which was largely triggered by globalization and the internet – does not suppress the social uses and practices of representation, which in turn do not overcome that crisis. I will summarize this interregnum as an increasing difficulty for any given representation, as regards its capacity to stand-in for its referent, to rest upon

some definitive or uncontested authority. The predicament of representation is that, on the one hand, representation tends to reify its referents while making them visible, whilst on the other the regime of such visibility – whether dominant or subaltern, governmental or dissident – is the condition for them to take part in the common world. If we surrender to reification, we do not attain the multiplicities, complexities and demands of the referents, whilst if we do away with representation, they will not exist in that world. Again, such visibility has nothing to do with sheer appearance, let alone with the futilities of celebrity culture, but with meaningful existence. As noted by Hannah Arendt (1998: 55), ‘the curse of slavery consisted not only in being deprived of freedom and of visibility, but also in the fear of [the enslaved people] [...] “that from being obscure they should pass away leaving no trace that they have existed”’.

In other words, representation cannot be dismissed because there is no social reality beyond representation. Only the experience of great bodily pain seems to have no connection to the outer world of life, but that is exactly what deprives us of our feeling for reality, the experience in which I am no longer ‘recognizable’, the borderline between life and death (Arendt 1998: 51). Just like language and artefacts, representation is the very bond between us. But it will be continually lambasted for being inadequate, incomplete, inaccurate, oblivious, biased and so on. And yet this can only be done by other representations. The predicament recalls Chantal Mouffe’s thinking on agonistic politics, for which conflictual interests are integral to democracy (Mouffe 1993). But it also expresses the simultaneously foundational and contingent character of representation, as a condition for reciprocity and relationality. Returning to the student participants of Tate Encounters, they might have sensed that the byproduct of their ‘recognition’ was to be positioned in a hierarchical relationship of dependence, not only on the museum that bestows upon them such distinction, but also on the BME identity to which they were bound. As noted by Professor Andrew Dewdney (2017), ‘Human subjects in the multiple worlds and zones of the present experience greater uncertainty and insecurity, which is at odds with settled and fixed identities’. However, there is a significant difference between being given an identity by others, albeit the others are inevitably yardsticks for the constitution of identities through relations of difference, and giving yourself an identity, albeit identities are always contingent, contextual and relational. While rejecting those targeting measures, the participants did not necessarily reject the furtherance of a more complex politics of representation. So this is a problem we can confront hereafter: how should their fluid and changing subjectivities be effectively recognized?

The Art Museum and its Publics

Tate Encounters was the first research project internally authorized by Tate Britain towards the creation of change within the practices of the museum in relation to the social domain. At that time, the museum secured from the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) equal status to universities in accessing national public funding for research. The strategic programme launched at the time by the AHRC was titled ‘Diasporas, Migration and Identities’. The project consisted of a three-year interdisciplinary research programme in collaboration with London South Bank University (LSBU) and the University of Arts London (UAL). In many respects, its research questions centred on the audiences in terms of ‘excluded subjects’ or ‘non-attenders’, and the lack of movement in audience figures from culturally diverse groups. Tate was legally obliged to develop these groups and was organizationally seeking to attract them. The project also focused on the disconnections between the policies and practices of cultural diversity in creating sustained relationships with ‘BME’ audiences. Similarly, it addressed the internal lines of tension between curatorial, education and marketing departments concerning how ideas of culturally diverse audiences were figured (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 75 *et seq.*). Moreover, Tate Encounters aimed to test the research paradigms and models underpinning cultural diversity policy through a ‘more intellectually sound account of cultural diversity at the level of lived experience’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 77). This was delivered by a longitudinal action-research process fully embedded within the art museum. In comparison, further developed projects such as Transforming Tate Learning are quite self-referential,¹² whilst projects like Time to Listen – in partnership with the Royal Shakespeare Company – fall short of implicating the museum itself.¹³

The collaboration between Tate Britain and LSBU facilitated visits of more than 600 first-year students, who documented their experience, completed surveys, wrote essays and submitted media responses. Among them, a group of 12 students, later defined as co-researchers, engaged in a sustained auto-ethnographic encounter with the museum over the following two years. As a criterion of participation, all the students (or their parents or grandparents) should have migrated to Britain, besides being the first in their family to attend higher education. That produced a global set of migrational journeys that (initially) corresponded to the BME category. According to Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh (2013), the participants' resistance to being addressed through race and ethnicity categories, as well as constituted by notions of fixed identity, was perceived and demonstrated during the whole project, from their early engagements to their own data generation as co-researchers. The students insisted on 'a recognition of the fluidity of identity alongside the primacy of subjectivity in relation to forging meaning in and through the visual' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 123). Moreover, their own assessments of Tate Britain offered a particular sense of how cultural value operates, since participation for them 'was not about learning to like art nor acquiring the habit of attending museums' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 126). In other words, the students did not 'meaningfully accept the museum's terms of engagement' (Dewdney *et al.* 2010: 86). For the investigators, what sustained their relationship with the art museum was 'the expression of a questioning position towards, or more accurately a trajectory through the museum' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 148).

In order to explore some of the constraints and decisions that underline this disjuncture, it might be opportune to recall how the art museum has been historically interested in visitors' participation. According to Andrew McClellan (2003), the gradual integration of museums into the cultural apparatus of the modern state welcomed virtually everyone, from working classes to new immigrants. In the nineteenth century, the need to civilize, refine and uplift the masses became pressing, along with the need to avoid anarchy and do away with class struggle. In the following century, the idea that museums should be grounded in their communities and serve their constituents gained some currency, especially among educators. At the same time, the publics – who have been historically deemed as disorderly, untutored, noisy etc. – continued to be regarded as a nuisance to be tolerated, especially among directors and curators. As Kalliopi Fouseki and Laurajane Smith (2013) observed in relation to community consultation, communities often see consultation as opportunities for the recognition of historical issues, whereas the museum wants more simply to collect community views. Similarly, the so-called democratization of museums has largely kept audiences in the dark about decision-making. Even the history of the publics does not focus on the lived experiences or actual responses of the audiences, but on the ways through which they have been conceptualized, referred and ultimately produced by the museum (see Hudson 1975; Duncan 1995; McClellan 2003; Barrett 2011). In this context, the 'unwillingness' of the participants to like art or to acquire the habit of attending museums could not be dismissed as a kind of barbarian attitude, nor even marked as a cultural deficit to be compensated.

The need to attract and better understand the audiences has also been coupled with ambivalent interests, if we consider the impact of cultural policy on museum practices. For the New Labour government, the arts, culture and sports became central to the task of 'recreating the sense of community, identity and civic pride that should define our country' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 47). National museums were then identified as 'key agents of social and cultural change in the public domain' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 49). As noted by art historian Sophie Orlando (2012: 17), 'Le rôle du musée est pointé du doigt; il est désigné comme un lieu d'expérimentation, de promotion, de création des identités collectives'. However, as government funding was gradually withdrawn, those civic and educational purposes were soon informed and fashioned by business. In 2005, an advertising company commissioned by Tate Britain to update its image arrived – with some delay – at the conclusion that 'the most contemporary aspect of Tate Britain was the viewer/visitor and their engagement with the work of art' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 58). Indeed, since the introduction of the Museums and Galleries Act in 1992, when the Tate Gallery was pushed to be responsible for its financial independence, the role of the marketing department significantly increased within the institution. The same happened to visitor studies, because of the necessity to maintain, build and refine a knowledge-base of visitors. Over the period, the institution was caught in

the dilemma of having to provide the “climatic zones” which can enrich our *appreciation and understanding* of the art of this century [emphasis added], and, at the same time, ‘a condition in which visitors can experience a [timeless] *sense of discovery* [emphasis added]’ (Serota 2000 [1996]: 55). The decade that had begun with the proposal to enhance museum learning and experience (Falk and Dierking 1997 [1992]) ended up with the idea that ‘the consumer is the product’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999: 163-83). In this context, the audience emerged (or was produced) through a range of strategies – from public programmes of access, education and critical discussions of what constituted artistic value, through the creation of membership schemes and self-selecting tours, to the conversion of security staff into gallery assistants – committed to simultaneously demonstrate the public value of the museum and secure its financial maintenance.

From Visitor Studies to Collaborative Research

Considering how Tate Britain was then formulated, the student participants could only manifest their heterogeneous demands as a group of individual consumers. Their plurality of interests was often substituted by the standing-for term ‘wider public’, with little acknowledgment of their agency. Such a generalizing notion could perform numerous institutional functions, the main one being self-legitimation (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 152-3, 158-9). According to Tate Encounters’ investigators, the focus on the ‘public’ value of the museum in the 1980s produced the marketing category of ‘visitor’, whereas the project of aesthetic modernism in the 1990s produced the experientially defined viewer. Afterwards, cultural diversity policy – especially through the practices of learning departments – brought into the curatorial space and narratives of the museum ‘a substantially more embodied and socially-engaged concept of audience’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 73). In this sense, learning was the agent responsible for bringing the museum closer to the wider social and cultural context; a process through which the publics would be considered as ‘an increasingly individualized set of relations’, instead of ‘an abstract idea or an income-generation figure’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 63). Nevertheless, educational practices were also assigned the task of increasing (and containing) the number of visitors by means of audience development projects aligned with the objectives of national funding applications (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 58-60). Therefore, those ‘socially-orientated’ demands on the museum were often reduced to some ‘additional’ activity, ‘reconfirming the established view that gallery-education, as the prime agent of socially-engaged practice, was consistently conceived and received within the museum as “added value”’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 63).

In this context, Tate Encounters was initially devised as a kind of visitor study, particularly marked by a shift of attention from class to ‘racialized practices focusing upon cultural difference’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 13). Indeed, it was set out amid several changes in the methodologies of audience research. Besides the account of non-white subjectivities through socio-demographic categories, a new segmentation model gained currency by the early 2000s, analyzing visitors’ responses in terms of their motivations for visiting and the kind of experience the visit had elicited (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 59). According to Jennifer Barrett (2011: 124), this model ‘acknowledges the differences between individuals and attempts to group “like audiences” to uncover each segment’s motivations and expectations’. As she continues, the role of segmentation studies is ‘to gain competitive advantage by catering for specific segments’. Following the success of such a model, New Labour’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) decided to take a step further: to remove barriers to attendance in relation to non-visitors. This meant to stimulate demand, foster social inclusion and widen participation. The goal was to attract ‘marginal audiences’ occupying – as they were projected – a position of ‘cultural need’. Conversely, Tate Encounters attempted to place the student participants out of a ‘resolved image of the public’ whose interests could be spoken by any authority (cultural policy-makers, museum directors etc.). It strove to understand their participation within a framework in which their encounters with the museum were considered a complex ‘social’ process (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 127).

Indeed, one of the major shifts entailed by Tate Encounters was to transform the initial visitor study about ‘missing audiences’ into a collaborative research process between participants and investigators. The decision to acknowledge the students’ participation as that

of co-researchers was taken nine months into the project, on the basis of ‘an evolving and reflexive relationship in the ethnographic encounter with [them]’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 123). The research team came to understand their media productions as ‘a more sophisticated process of response to both the art museum and the research questions’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 128). According to the authors, this process demanded of the students ‘an equally rigorous process of self-reflexivity [...], from which they identified their own questions of practice and research in relation to Tate Britain’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 129). This acknowledgement of participation as research is surely an important step towards the consequent recognition of participants’ subjectivities from the grassroots up. Several issues could be deepened from now on, for instance the subtle but thought-provoking move from a tutorial process to de facto collaboration. We can see this being referred to in the investigators’ account of the relationship between the students’ responses and the overall project. In the first instance, the students’ projects were deemed to achieve the status of research *in dialogue* with the overall project, i.e. ‘in the co-dependency of the relationship between participants and investigators’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 130). At the same time, their media interventions were seen as *parallel routes of investigations* with definitive research outcomes, that ‘do not respond to questions outlined within the research literatures from which the project emerged’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 131).

However, the problem I would like to approach brings us back to the predicament of representation. Certainly, each co-researcher would relate differently to the overall project. They do not only perform their trajectories through the museum, but also through the project itself. For the main investigators, while the co-researchers’ media practice ‘began as a practice without a theory, it ended in a theory of practice’, or rather in an ‘analysis from the perspective of audience’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 129, 147). Considering those practices as such, instead of what should be analyzed, would be in line with Bruno Latour’s idea – one of the main references for the organizational study undertaken by Tate Encounters – that the actors produce their own theory of practice, and that the investigators should not replace them (see Latour 2005).¹⁴ However, they are also recognized as insights provided by ‘a critically engaged audience’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 18). As observed by Orlando (2012: 25), ‘Non seulement le groupe [des étudiants] interrogeait la manière dont les définitions de la britannicité sont produites et reproduites par l’institution, mais il développait un contre-pouvoir ou une réponse critique’. Although part of those interventions is available for analysis not only in the book but also in the digital archive of the project,¹⁵ the righteous refusal to analyze them risks putting aside the agency and criticality of the audience, especially the impact of those critiques in terms of structural transformation. Anyhow, if the co-researchers are not analyzed, they are conceptualized – and this brings us to another set of issues.

The Predicament of Representation within Tate Encounters

As already mentioned, the criteria to select the student participants produced ‘a global set of migrational journeys’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 124). Given that co-researchers’ submissions were framed in a ‘globally “social” account’ as transvisual, and transvisuality was regarded as ‘the visual component of transculturality’, it can be argued that the co-researchers were conceptualized as transmigrating individuals, ‘defined by an experience of subjectivity’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 125, 128, 159). This is also suggested by the move from chapter five to six of the *Post-critical Museology*, through which one can think that transcultural audiences are reconceptualized as transmigrational subjects after post-structuralism and post-colonialism. Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh correctly asserted that targeting policies – as a politics of remoteness – abstract and reduce the heterogeneity presented by the co-researchers. For the investigators, this could only be grasped by a *politics of the proximate*. They proposed to make sense of that heterogeneity by means of a combination of concepts (transmedial, transvisual and transcultural) that somehow were summarized by the transmigrational (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: ch. 6). While drawing on this concept, they clearly wanted to overcome the term ‘wider public’, as well as an outdated conception of culture. For them, ‘cultural diversity policy is not relativist enough’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2010: 89). Conversely, they advocated ‘a reflexive culture, happy to test all claims and continuously and openly revalue historical culture in the light of present contingent and changing realities’ (Dewdney *et al.* 2010: 91). But it seems that the

transmigrational shores up rather than bridges the representational gap between the concept and the multiplicity to which it refers.

In this account, the transmigrating subject is assumed to be a temporary inhabitant of the city whose cultural landscape the museum is called to shape (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 154). Differently from the migrant, the transmigrating subject is constantly migrating. As they move from place to place, they undergo 'so many different experiences of national cultures and their institutions' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 155). As they pass through one cultural setting to another, they realize that the cultural values to which they are attached are relative and mutable. This mutability of reference points – precisely what the authors called transculture – outdates the still national and certainly institutional insistence on the dissemination of some hierarchical values that the museum is invested to preserve and protect (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 154-7). This also implies a shift from class and race to 'cultural difference emerging out of pronounced international migration', as well as the advent of a particular way of seeing – what the authors called transvisuality or 'seeing on the move' – that questions 'the framing of modes of address' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 13, 131, 161). In this sense, the transmigrating subject is not divided and dislocated, but 'divided and networked', i.e. they continually undergo differentiation as they constantly rearticulate cultural difference (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 156-8). Moreover, the transmigrational emphasizes 'the possibility of dynamic and, even, accelerated movement' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 154). And finally, it sheds light on the fractiousness of different cultural encounters that cannot be held together by any 'image of resolution' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 155).

As we see, the transmigrational strives to question any image of resolution at the same time as it attempts to portray an emerging subject, as proximately as possible, in relation to a dynamic and distributed cultural process. From this perspective, 'the challenge is no longer that of achieving fair and proportional systems of representation, but of mapping a new sense of a public realm and acknowledging new kinds of connectedness' (Dewdney *et al.* 2010: 88). But can the transmigrational account for 'the processes through which cultural value is currently being lived' (Dewdney *et al.* 2013: 245)? What are the effects of recognizing the co-researchers as transmigrating subjects? I will argue that the transmigrational is inadvertently underpinned by a conflation between BME and migrant categories that is problematic, for it overlooks a plethora of other categories and their intersections, in relation to the experiences of people who are all 'on the move' but differently coded in terms of race and class: second-generation, foreign-born, Old Commonwealth born, European Union citizens, Eastern European born, non-elite migrants, non-UK passport holders, asylum-seekers, refugees etc. Accordingly, the concept reiterates the same conflation between the two senses of representation (as 'portrayal' and 'speaking for') that was questioned by Gayatri Spivak in her famous essay about the subaltern. For Spivak (1993: 71), 'they [*darstellen* and *vertreten*] are related, but running them together, especially in order to say [as Foucault and Deleuze did, according to her] that beyond both is where oppressed subjects speak, act and know *for themselves*, leads to an essentialist, utopian politics'. Moreover, the transmigrational unduly relies on the 'globalising compression of time and space' and the universalization of the 'global capital and labour flow' in accounting for 'what is currently happening' (Dewdney *et al.* 2010).

In order to support my argument about the conflation produced by the concept, I will draw on the collaborative and longitudinal ethnography developed by Les Back and Shamser Sinha (2019) with thirty young migrants in London. The sociologists argue that 'there is a distinction between those who are free to move at will and others whose ability to travel is blocked, controlled or "managed"' – what they call 'a world of *divided connectedness*' as it combines both opportunity *and* confinement (Back and Sinha 2019: 2). Thus, the relatively cheap availability of travel and the interconnection enhanced by the digital age might conceal the fact that 'easy global mobility is only an option for some' (Back and Sinha 2019: 55). Moreover, they argue that border control is moving into the heart of social and professional life in London by implicating landlords, doctors, teachers and other professionals in sharing information with the Home Office (Back and Sinha 2019: 26). They also observe that the definition of who counts as a migrant is a matter of considerable dispute, and that facts about immigration are largely shaped by the stories that are told about these flows – for instance, of public anxiety about domestic scarcity of resources – and not the other way round (Back and Sinha 2019: 18-20). Recalling among other situations that colonial citizens who came to

Britain after the Second World War were transformed into 'immigrants' whereas migration from the Old Commonwealth was not seen as problematic, the authors conclude that the migrant is 'an affect of racism rather than the quality and history of patterns of people flow' (Back and Sinha 2019: 68).

It goes without saying that Back and Sinha's account is better positioned in time than *Tate Encounters* – which was finished 10 years earlier – to grasp the hardening up of the British State. The sociologists also reckon that the more recent era of globalization and neoliberalism – which prompts capitalism to internationally harvest skilled workers and consumers of national services like education – blurs the former distinction between 'deserved' and 'undeserved' migrants, and so pushes racism beyond the colour-line into 'a new hierarchy of belonging' (Back and Sinha 2019: 68-9, 72). In this sense, it is the divisions and hierarchies that can now be characterized as 'transmigrational', as they move and shift according to new circumstances. As a last note, in order to prevent the generalization and abstraction of the bodies and constituencies whose ups and downs they attempt to narrate, Back and Sinha (2019: 4, 60-1, 92-5) advocate a deep commitment to dialogue, listening and translation (over an extended period of time), in a process that – while moving from data extraction to 'a sociable process of travelling alongside them in dialogue' – partially collapses the dichotomy between fieldwork with the participants and the analysis done solely by the researchers – a method that resonates with *Tate Encounters*' own positionality.

Discussion

While seeking to overcome the reductiveness of the current politics of diversity, *Tate Encounters* also made visible the difficulties involved in the attempt to recognize changing subjectivities. While seeking to confront the crisis of the representational system, it also made apparent that we cannot neglect the irreducible role of representation in complex societies. Yet the predicament of representation should not be limited to a paradox, let alone a deadlock. We can now resume the problem outlined before: how can changing subjectivities be effectively recognized? Moreover, how can a policy be devised and implemented – not only in the art museum – that consistently acknowledges 'the real experiences of ethnic minorities' or, more precisely, the questioning trajectories of those changing subjectivities through the institutions, without putting aside the crisis of the representational system?

The point is that the problem cannot be magically solved by any political will, as it implies a cognitive and 'poethical' problem. Representation must be thought and practised otherwise. So *what if* representation, as the inscription of subjectivities into the cultural and political community, was neither assimilated by consensus, especially in the sense of a 'disquieting apathy', nor by determinacy in the sense of a formal steadiness, but showed up as 'an ongoing history of struggle'? Indeed the problem is not new and has somehow been outlined within different frameworks since the crisis of representational systems was made apparent by postmodernism (Greene 1994; Dewdney 2017) – from the question of how 'to present [...] something that is not presentable' (Lyotard 1991: 125) to the question of how 'can we learn to *think about cultural processes without categories*' (Manovich 2018: 17). However, in order not to dismiss the problem of racism and its congeners, I will frame it here in relation to some pillars of modern rationality with the help of an essay written by the philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva in 2018, titled 'On Difference Without Separability'.¹⁶

Addressing European States' responses to the 'refugee crisis', Ferreira da Silva appeals for the re-imagination of the world as a complex whole without order, where 'each existant's singularity is contingent upon its becoming one possible expression of all the other existants, with which it is entangled beyond space and time'. The challenge facing representation is doubly at stake here, as the portrayal of a world and as the relationship between each and other 'existants'. According to Ferreira da Silva, this would require that uncertainty, along with non-locality, was thought of as a descriptor of the world as well as a raw material for collective creation, rather than a staple of the modern racial grammar that, along with fear, allegedly justifies walls and deportations. In this account, cultural difference is but an instrument of (spatial) separability which, along with (temporal) sequentiality, postulates the particularities of white Europeans as the fullest development of humanity. She continues: 'When nonlocality

guides our imaging of the universe, difference is not a manifestation of an unresolvable *estrangement*, but the expression of an elementary *entanglement*'.

Ferreira da Silva's proposition challenges cultural difference as we *know* it, i.e. as something that focuses on the hierarchical separation between cultures. Moreover, it does so from the standpoint of a task that defies the very rationale underpinning our cognitive faculties. It claims that the world must be imagined otherwise if we want to stop the reproduction of human collectives as 'threatening strangers'. However, insofar as it flirts with the absence of representation by projecting a world without order, the proposition can be a double-edged sword, since the idea that 'everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existant', albeit true at the level of subatomic particles, might unwillingly allow the interpretation that the already visible could speak for the not yet visible. On the other hand, it could hopefully support the reversibility between the asset value based upon the collection and the cultural value as lived and expressed by the audiences.

If the museum wants to keep its social relevance in the public realm by other means than risk management, it must earnestly review the bases of its own cultural authority, making visible (in a consequent manner) the ongoing struggles around cultural value. Moreover, it must play its part in the distribution of the means of representation, in accordance with contemporary cultural dynamics. Arguing that the museum remains a deeply analogue institution, Dewdney (2017) points out that 'both analogue and civic modes of representation built positions of cultural authority based upon a selective tradition [...] which is now challenged by the decentred, distributed and networked character of post-digital culture'. But we still have to find the means to raise bottom-up approaches, which are usually ethnographically crafted, to the large scale and speed of the digital power, so that the efforts of social justice do not sacrifice multiplicity.

Meanwhile, a policy to be devised might be constantly 'mapping' rather than 'achieving' cultural differences by means of a politics of representation that does not comply with any resolved image. The museum is certainly a crucial site to make dispensable the fear of strangeness. In this case, mapping must not be another control device, but the very platform that gives room to those questioning trajectories. Finally, the predicament of representation itself cannot be effaced. It has to become an ordinary entanglement.

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Notes

¹ The Macpherson report was the outcome of a formal inquiry headed by Sir William Macpherson on the botched investigations by the Metropolitan Police into the murder, in April 1993, of a black teenaged architecture student named Stephen Lawrence, in a racially motivated attack while waiting for a bus in London. The report ultimately concluded that the Metropolitan Police – and the broader criminal justice system – was professionally incompetent and institutionally racist. In its turn, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, a further extension of the 1976 Act in relation to police and other public authorities, requires all public institutions to take action to promote race equality and proactively prevent racism.

² Arts Council England, 'Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case: A Data Report 2017-18', 2019. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/equality-diversity-and-creative-case-data-report-2017-2018>, accessed 22 October 2019.

- ³ Nicholas Serota, 'Introduction', in Arts Council England, 'Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case: A Data Report 2017-18', 2019. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/equality-diversity-and-creative-case-data-report-2017-2018>, accessed 22 October 2019.
- ⁴ For Paul Gilroy, who I will mention later, it 'guarantees absolutely nothing'.
- ⁵ Jonathan Knott, 'Arts Leaders Slam "New Paternalism" of Diversity Initiatives', Arts Professional 29 March 2019. <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/arts-leaders-slam-new-paternalism-diversity-initiatives>, accessed 22 October 2019.
- ⁶ Clive Nwonka, 'The Arts Were Supposed to Champion Diversity. What Went Wrong?', The Guardian 15 February 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/15/arts-diversity-arts-council-england-inequality>, accessed 22 October 2019.
- ⁷ In order to propose this typology, I mainly drew on two different reports: (a) *Navigating Difference* (2006), commissioned by four different UK audience development agencies and supported by ACE (Arts Council England 2006), and (b) the Third Text report edited by Richard Appignanesi, *Beyond Cultural Diversity* (2010).
- ⁸ Part of my choices will be justified throughout the article. I just want to state from the outset why I am not going to discuss 'decolonization'. This absolutely does not mean I regard the 'practices of decoloniality' (Mignolo and Walsh 2018) unimportant. The first reason is that, if we want to keep British cultural policies at stake, we will have to cling on to 'diversity'. The debates on government policies in relation to decolonization seem to pick up the word in the Oxford dictionary, as related to the decline of the British Empire (see, for instance, Heinlein 2015). Secondly, for the problem I want to address, 'decolonization' – as Sumaya Kassim puts it – 'runs the risk of becoming another buzzword, like "diversity"'. It is subject to the same wariness of 'being tokenised'. See Sumaya Kassim, 'The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised', Media Diversified, 15 November 2017. <https://mediadiversified.org/2017/11/15/the-museum-will-not-be-decolonised/>, accessed 15 June 2020.
- ⁹ My reference to Kobena Mercer's 'Black Art and the Burden of Representation' is quite allusive here. It risks generalizing his critique – which I find quite pertinent – to the burden that falls (or used to fall) on the shoulders of Black artists of having to be representative of their communities, as a consequence of their marginalization by the structures of racism and the hierarchy of access to cultural capital. I also subscribe to his critique of the inconsistencies in the logic of 'populist modernism', which by the way helps us to think about the predicament of representation as the inextricable persistence of blind spots in the very attempt to dismantle the essentializing effects of representation. The point is that his critique does not solve, for instance, the problem of 'the invisibility, and lack of access to public discourse, of the community as a whole' (Mercer 1994 [1990]: 240).
- ¹⁰ In his well-known 'Museum as Contact Zones', the anthropologist James Clifford (1997: 191-2) beautifully points out the difficulties involved in the task: 'And which community has the power to determine what emphasis the museum will choose? [...] Could it [the museum] establish relations of trust with all the relevant groups and individuals? [...] How could the relationship deal with conflict within contemporary tribal communities? [...] How much discussion and negotiation is enough?'
- ¹¹ Paul Gilroy, 'Still No Black in the Union Jack?', Tribune 26 January 2019. <https://www.tribunemag.co.uk/2019/01/still-no-black-in-the-union-jack>, accessed 22 October 2019.
- ¹² Emily Pringle (ed), 'Transforming Tate Learning', 2014. <https://www.tate.org.uk/file/transforming-tate-learning>, accessed 22 October 2019.
- ¹³ Time to Listen, 'Evidence from the Tracking Arts Learning and Engagement [TALE] Project', 2018. <https://researchtale.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/time-to-listen-tale-project-final-report.pdf>, accessed 22 October 2019.

- ¹⁴ The idea is developed throughout Latour's book *Reassembling the Social* and applies to a much broader issue, but one passage – by the way, close to Latour's reference to Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) – hopefully suggests how 'analysis' can eventually replace 'reality': 'It [Actor-Network-Theory] claims that since social accounts have failed on science so pitifully, it must have failed everywhere, science being special only in the sense that its practitioners did not let sociologists pass through their turf and destroy their objects with 'social explanations' without voicing their dissent loud and clear. Elsewhere the 'informants' had always resisted but in a way that was not so noticeable because of their lower status or, when it was noticed, their furor was simply added to the data of the critical theorist as further proof that "naive actors" cling to their pet illusions even in the face of the most blatant refutations' (Latour 2005: 101).
- ¹⁵ Tate Encounters, 'Tate Encounters: Britishness and Visual Culture', [n.d.]. <http://process.tateencounters.org>, accessed 22 October 2019.
- ¹⁶ Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'On Difference Without Separability', 2018. https://issuu.com/amilcarparker/docs/denise_ferreira_da_silva, accessed 22 October 2019.

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