

# Uncomfortable Truths: British museums and the legacies of slavery in the bicentenary year, 2007

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## Abstract

This article examines the ways in which the legacies of the slave trade are being represented in British museums in response to the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. The legacies of the slave trade are complex and wide ranging and little agreement can be found as to what they may be and how they manifest themselves today. This article assesses which aspects of legacy are considered most salient by museums in a contemporary and multicultural society and aims to identify both the practical and theoretical considerations which affect their representation. Within this central question, it is also argued that attitudes towards legacy in British museums reflect the belief or confidence of an institution in the idea that representations of the past can shape how people view themselves and others within society.

## Introduction

Over the last years museums have, in the context of post-colonialism, social inclusion and multicultural agendas, become an important tool in spheres other than their traditional role as educators. They have been forced to accept that they cannot be neutral and that encoded within their displays are ideologies, hierarchies and values of dominant social values and beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Museums in multicultural Britain have sought to include multiple perspectives and include those who have been historically ignored or spoken for in the past,<sup>2</sup> diversity is to be celebrated and it is crucial that black minority ethnic groups see their histories and cultures represented together, and entwined with, the accepted narratives of what constitutes the 'national heritage'. Museums are now seen, and view themselves, as places that "can provide a tolerant space where difficult contemporary issues can be explored in safety"<sup>3</sup> and offer a space for reconciliation<sup>4</sup>. Their role is no longer restricted to reflecting society, but in shaping it too<sup>5</sup> and the methods through which this occurs are still being negotiated and investigated.

The history of slavery has long been neglected in the national story of Great Britain<sup>6</sup> and previous attempts to deal with this highly contentious topic have come in for both praise and criticism. However, there is what Stuart Hall describes as a "deep, slow motion

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Sandell, *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2006), 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Macdonald and Gordon Fyfe, *Theorizing museums: representing identity and diversity in a changing world* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life, the value of museums* (London: DCMS, 2005), 11.

<sup>4</sup> V. Szekeres, "Representing diversity and challenging racism: the Migration Museum," in *Museums, Society, Inequality*, by Richard Sandell (London: Routledge, 2002), 142-152.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Sandell, "Museums and the Combating of Social Inequality: Roles, Responsibilities, Resistance," in *Museums and their Communities*, ed. Sheila Watson (London: Routledge, 2002), 3-23.

<sup>6</sup> Moira G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (Routledge, 2001), 15.

revolution” in progress which is unsettling British heritage from being bounded unquestionably to the “interests of the white upper- and middle-class great and the good.”<sup>7</sup> Starting in the early 1990s, predominantly in the port cities of Liverpool, Bristol and London, (seen as the ‘real historical villains of the piece’<sup>8</sup>) the history of slavery has gradually and grudgingly been acknowledged as an aspect of British history. With 2007 marking the bicentenary of the Slave Trade Act, museums, the Government, the national media and many towns and cities have started the process of assessing this painful past and what it means today and in the future.

Museums have been seen to take a lead in commemorating the bicentenary,<sup>9</sup> evidence of a growing confidence on behalf of museums to tackle more difficult and controversial topics. The development of social agency theory in museums has developed rapidly over the last 15 years, and so can help to illustrate the shifts which have taken place between the first slavery exhibitions of the mid 1990s and those in the bicentennial year. This article will look at some of the political and social influences which impact on the way in which exhibitions approach the representation of legacy of the trade of enslaved Africans, with particular attention to the 2007 Bicentenary commemorations of the Slave Trade Act as the first real effort on a national scale to address Britain’s role.

### **Case Study Museums**

Using museum exhibitions and themes from around the country the ways in which museums are approaching the representation of legacy in exhibitions dealing with slavery in 2007, will be examined and illustrated. However, two case study museums have been looked at in closer detail: the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool (ISM) and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (BECM) which hosts the “Breaking the Chains” exhibition.<sup>i</sup>

Neither exhibition is the first attempt by the cities to tell the history of slavery. The ISM is based on an exhibition which opened at the Merseyside maritime Museum in 1994 called “Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity”, which at the time of opening was revolutionary as a collaboration of 11 guest curators from the UK, Africa and the West Indies.<sup>10</sup> The Bristol Museum and Art Gallery opened an exhibition in 2000 called “Bristol and Transatlantic Slavery” and was seen as an attempt to “fill in a missing piece of the jigsaw”.<sup>11</sup> The museum closed recently for refurbishment and will open again with a gallery based on the BECM exhibition. As a result both cities can be perceived to be building and developing on past experiences and exhibitions. Also, current events in both cities – such as racially motivated violence and evidence of a more politicised black community (see below) – have been linked to the legacies of slavery, have demonstrated the tensions that still exist.

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<sup>7</sup> Hall as quoted in Littler and Naidoo, *The politics of heritage*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Simpson, *Making Representations*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> David Lammy (then Culture Minister) as quoted in 2006, [http://www.dpm.gov.uk/slave\\_trade\\_bicentenary.asp](http://www.dpm.gov.uk/slave_trade_bicentenary.asp).

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Tibbles, *Transatlantic slavery: against human dignity* (Liverpool University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> R. Vaswani, “A Respectable Trade?,” *Museums Journal*, no. May (2000): 16-18.

## Political and Social Influences

Museums are embedded in their social context and the 25 years have seen significant changes in the museum sector and in political and social attitudes. Kwame Kwei-Armah asserts that “post-Lawrence inquiry Britain has changed”<sup>12</sup> and, in talking about the International Slavery Museum opening in Liverpool directly links the more vocal, confident black community of 2007 to the representation of their story within the museum. He sees black people as feeling a part of Liverpool now, rather than confined to the infamous and troubled Toxteth area. Kwei-Armah correctly identifies the Lawrence case as a turning point in attitudes towards racism in Britain, however several reports – such as the Parekh Report (2000) – have highlighted how “a decade after the murder of Stephen Lawrence, racism still clearly takes a range of subtle and unsubtle forms in British culture.”<sup>13</sup>

“The Parekh Report: The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain”,<sup>14</sup> commissioned by the Home Office, highlights the fact that racist incidents do not exist in a vacuum and should not be viewed as “isolated incidents or individual acts.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, they relate to “*notions of cultural value, belonging and worth [...] defined and fixed by decisions we make about what is and is not our culture, and how we are represented (or not) by cultural institutions.*”<sup>16</sup> The report emphasises the case of the National Maritime Museum which was criticised for a juxtaposition of a ‘Jane Austen-like figure sipping tea’<sup>17</sup> and the hand of an enslaved African stretching through the floorboards beneath her. Critics saw the display as apologist and an attempt “at depriving the British people of any aspect of their history in which they can take justifiable pride.”<sup>18</sup> Whether this pride is in the slave trade, the Empire or Jane Austen is unclear. However, the museum director Richard Ormond stood firm: “The museum is not just here to perpetuate the old view. We want galleries to be challenging.”<sup>19</sup> A standpoint taken firmly, and vocally, by the head of the ISM Richard Benjamin.<sup>ii</sup> This reassessment of history, the recognition that “no individual, group or institution has the right – or any longer the power – to define the history of others”<sup>20</sup> should not be about ‘political correctness’<sup>iii</sup> or the removal or demonising of white people. Instead it should be about including the “*experiences and contributions of those conventionally omitted and of seeing colonisers and colonised as sharing a single, entwined history.*”<sup>21</sup> Highlighted as ‘notable and courageous exceptions’ in addressing issues of racism, ‘amnesia’ regarding the former Empire and reflecting the current, diverse population are the exhibition in the National Maritime Museum and the Merseyside Maritime Museum which deal with the subject of slavery.

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<sup>12</sup> K. Kwei-Armah, “The International Slavery Museum opens its doors in Liverpool next week with an exhibition naming history’s greatest black achievers. Some are household names, others barely known. All are extraordinary,” *The Independent: Extra*, August 17, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Littler and Naidoo, *The Politics of Heritage*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> B. Parekh, *The Parekh Report: The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (London: Profile Books, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>17</sup> J. Exard, “A Cold Look at the British Empire,” *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, September 8, 1999, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Parekh, *The Parekh Report: The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, 159.

<sup>19</sup> Exard, “A Cold Look at the British Empire,” 21.

<sup>20</sup> Parekh, *The Parekh Report: The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*, 163.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Since the Parekh Report was published there has been a growing interest in the expansion of the role of the museum to acts as agents of social change and museums have begun to address more difficult and controversial subjects. The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (BECM) for example held a heated debate in 2006 about whether Bristol should make an official apology for the role they played in the slave trade. This sparked much discussion on radio shows in the area, a BBC Bristol discussion on the day of the debate did not feature anybody speaking in favour of an apology and soon descended into a one-sided, jingoistic – and potentially racist – derision of the idea.<sup>22</sup> White Bristolians seemed to view the suggestion of an apology as a personal attack and quickly divided ‘them’ from ‘us’ and voted 96% against an apology.<sup>23</sup> However, at the museum later that day the audience generally approved but voiced reservations about whether or not the UK or Bristol is “culturally mature enough to make the apology and really mean it”.<sup>24</sup> It is nevertheless evident that Bristol is beginning to address this history. In other aspects of city life a new shopping area was unveiled as “Merchants Quarters”, however, after a high profile campaign by the city’s black community (in particular the youth) it has been renamed.<sup>25</sup>

*“Understanding the histories and legacies of slavery is a matter of central importance in multi-cultural Britain and one addressed only too rarely in museums”<sup>26</sup>*

The lead up to the bicentenary has highlighted to many the importance of recognising the role of slavery and of Britain within it. The Understanding Slavery project has seen museums ‘set the pace of change.’<sup>27</sup> The initiative was developed as a national drive to promote the teaching of slavery in British schools, engaging with collections providing teachers with the tools, objects and information with which they can approach the topic and has succeeded in seeing the subject added to the National Curriculum. It is taught with an emphasis on modern lessons within the new ‘citizenship’ framework<sup>28</sup>, which encourages “social and moral responsibility”, “community involvement” and “political literacy” and will feature strong links to modern slavery although it is not, as yet, compulsory. The Understanding Slavery Initiative identified nine themes into which they divided their resources; West African history, Triangular Trade, Middle Passage, Slavery, Resistance and Rebellion, Abolition, Emancipation, Legacy and Diaspora. Within the Legacy and Diaspora sections special care has been given to highlighting both negative and positive effects. For example,

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<sup>22</sup> BBC Bristol, “Debate: Should Bristol apologise?” (BBC Bristol, May 10, 2006), A recording can be heard at [http://www.ligali.org/media/bbc\\_apologyradiophone\\_indebate-100506.wma](http://www.ligali.org/media/bbc_apologyradiophone_indebate-100506.wma) and again featured phrases and rhetoric such as “PC gone mad” and “soon we won’t be able to call HP sauce ‘Brown Sauce’”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> T. Agbetu, *Public Debate: The Apology Debate* (British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, 2010), [www.ligali.org/article.php?id=462](http://www.ligali.org/article.php?id=462).

<sup>25</sup> P. Wintour, “Commemoration day to recall slave trade and make UK face up to past,” *The Guardian*, March 23, 2007, 4.

<sup>26</sup> RCMG, *Inspiration, Identity, Learning: An evaluation of the impact of DCMS/DfES strategic commissioning 2003-2004: National/Regional Partnerships* (RCMG, University of Leicester, 2004), 193, <http://www.le.ac.uk/ms/research/rcmgpublicationsandprojects.html>.

<sup>27</sup> S. Heal, “Editorial: Slavery initiative begins to fill the gap,” *Museums Journal*, no. July (2006): 4.

<sup>28</sup> DCMS, *Initial Report of the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2007), <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/citizenship/section.cfm?Sectionid=38&hierarchy=1.3>; B. Miles, “Teaching about the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Principles to adopt, pitfalls to avoid,” *Race Equality Teaching* 25, no. 1 (2006): 25-33.

racism and colonisation are featured alongside Creole languages, musical forms and, later political movements and figures which empowered descendants of enslaved Africans and led people to embrace their African heritage, such as the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>29</sup>

Used as a case study in the “Inspiration, Identity and Learning”<sup>30</sup> report, learning outcomes and institutional responses were seen to support the need for such an initiative; teachers were appreciative of museums being able to give a variety of perspectives and the project, and subsequent student response, was able to persuade teachers that although sensitive, the topic opened up discussion of wider topics and anticipated difficulties in classes with black pupils were overestimated.<sup>31</sup> Museums were also seen as a valuable tool in providing ‘deeper learning opportunities’. Museums themselves reported significant changes in both practice and attitude. National Museums Liverpool used the project as a part of their reassessment of the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery with the particular emphasis on developing more distinct African and Caribbean perspectives and presenting a more ‘personal face’ to slavery.<sup>32</sup> The Project Manager reported that funding for the project had “underestimated the need for change in museums [seeing] it as a much broader and significant issue, one of civic responsibility.”<sup>33</sup> Wider considerations of the way in which Black Minority Ethnic (BME) groups are represented in museums were highlighted and the report concludes that although “the project makes a brave beginning [...] there is still a long way to go.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Bicentenary Year 2007**

The bicentenary has been seen as an opportunity to develop the ways in which slavery is approached nationally. The then Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott believed that Britain would go through “a process of self-examination”<sup>35</sup> similar to the one experienced in the US with the publication of Alex Haley’s novel “Roots”. It has been argued that whilst the history is known, it is not yet acknowledged.<sup>36</sup> There are many visible reminders of slavery within British towns, such as the names and statues of slavers, but heritage sites themselves may have direct links to the proceeds of the trade. Harewood House near Leeds is a good example of a stately home built by money obtained through slavery and unafraid to address often ignored issues of imperial history and intertwine international events with the romanticised image of the English country house. James Walvin argues that in recognising that “Britain is steeped in a slave past” through such sites, there is the potential to “integrate the history of slavery into the centre of a national story.”<sup>37</sup> For the Bicentenary

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<sup>29</sup> Understanding Slavery, “Diaspora: The Impact of Slavery on Modern Societies,” 2006, <http://www.understandingslavery.com/themes/?id=6078> and “Legacy: Cultural Collisions” <http://www.understandingslavery.com/themes/?id=639>.

<sup>30</sup> RCMG, *Inspiration, Identity, Learning: An evaluation of the impact of DCMS/DfES strategic commissioning 2003-2004: National/Regional Partnerships*, 385-395.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 390-1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

<sup>35</sup> Wintour, “Commemoration day to recall slave trade and make UK face up to past,” 4.

<sup>36</sup> F. Heywood, “Breaking the chains,” *Museums Journal*, no. March (2006): 22-25.

<sup>37</sup> Littler and Naidoo, *The Politics of Heritage*, 8.

other British heritage sites have been reinterpreted, led by initiatives by both English Heritage and the National Trust to research links to slavery.

The bicentenary has given a focus through which museums can develop and communicate with each other and relevant groups in relation to the 2007 commemorations. Her Majesty's Government (HMG) coordinated an advisory group, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, of stakeholders consisting of museums, historians, faith groups, the media, activist groups (for example Amnesty International) and cultural events (such as the Notting Hill Carnival) with the aim of maximising the impact of the year's events.<sup>38</sup> The group was not intended to be an organising committee, instead a "sounding board for wider discussions on expectations and opportunities"<sup>39</sup> and to ensure that the bicentenary is relevant to local communities.

During discussions it became clear that for those involved in the group the commemorations offered an opportunity to rethink the ways in which slavery is represented in Britain. Most participants expressed a wish that something useful should come from the year; many mentioning potential links to contemporary issues such as human trafficking and racism. Also, many highlighted the need of cultural institutions to begin rethinking 'accepted wisdom' of previous attempts to tell the slavery story. Jack Lohman, of the Museum of Docklands, for example expressed a wish that London be "unmasked as a major slave city" and talked about the building of the museum itself by plantation owners, and Arthur Torrington, of the Equiano Society, looking to ensure that an exhibition in Birmingham "commemorates the achievements of Black abolitionists, as well as the work of Wilberforce and Clarkson."<sup>40</sup>

Both DCMS<sup>41</sup> and HMG<sup>42</sup> produced pamphlets about the bicentenary commemorations, both of which include sections dealing with the legacies of the trade. In the DCMS report the section "Looking to the Past" deals specifically with the transatlantic slave trade and recognising that the legacies of the trade is still a contentious and emotive topic. Although noncommittal in its tone, it does acknowledge that:

*"It is argued that some of those after effects include racism, poverty and conflict in Africa and the Caribbean, inequality, and complex cultural legacies. It is felt that these legacies continue to echo today in streets, workplaces and homes in this country."*<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Deputy Prime Minister's website, "Minutes from the 1st Meeting of the 2007 Bicentenary Advisory Group on commemorating the Abolition of the Slave Trade," January 19, 2007, [http://www.dpm.gov.uk/slave\\_trade\\_bicentenary.aspx](http://www.dpm.gov.uk/slave_trade_bicentenary.aspx).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> DCMS, "Reflecting on the Past and Looking to the Future: The 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire," 2007, [http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference\\_library/Publications/archive\\_2006/reflecting\\_on\\_the\\_past.htm](http://www.culture.gov.uk/Reference_library/Publications/archive_2006/reflecting_on_the_past.htm).

<sup>42</sup> Her Majesty's Government, "Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007 – Official Magazine," 2007, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1503665>.

<sup>43</sup> DCMS, "Reflecting on the Past and Looking to the Future: The 2007 Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in the British Empire," 7.

It also highlights the roles played in the abolition of the slave trade by “slaves and former slaves” and “countless ordinary British citizens who signed petitions, marched, lobbied and prayed for change.”<sup>44</sup> The second section “Looking to the Future” begins with a quote from a child soldier in Central Africa and links her story to slavery through “human suffering. Suffering that is separated by two centuries, but united by a practice of unspeakable cruelty: slavery.”<sup>45</sup>

The HMG report adopts a similar approach to dealing with legacies, again separating issues seen as stemming directly from the slave trade, “Today’s Issues” (such as the struggle for race equality, educational attainment and tackling poverty) and “21st Century Slavery” (child labour, human trafficking, bonded labour).<sup>46</sup>

Museums are capitalising on the unique position afforded to them by the public, their expanded function as playing an active role in societal change and their own self-awareness that their narratives help to shape the national story. The growing confidence displayed by UK museums in being able to act as tools for social change has been highlighted in professional discussions around the subject of the bicentenary<sup>47</sup> and in the way in which exhibitions and events have been planned and executed.

A Museums Association roundtable discussion brought together project leaders and curators from different institutions and initiatives to discuss broader issues such as legacy. Again, in this context, the distinction was drawn between legacies that were considered directly related to the slave trade and those linked in character. Whilst it was agreed that a connection could be made, some participants voiced concerns that in broadening the topic out to encompass modern topics it will distract from telling the specific story of the slave trade.<sup>48</sup> Maria Amidu acknowledged that racist ideologies were a major legacy of the slave trade, however questioned whether the story of Anthony Walker (featured in the ISM) was directly connected.

Even within the sector it can be seen that there is no unified approach to what constitutes ‘legacy’ and how it should be approached. This is reflected in the field. Both case study museums felt that they did not have the relevant in-house experience to properly and confidently address issues of contemporary slavery; “We need to find out more about that subject, our backgrounds are in museums, archaeology, history, so something like that is a new area for us.[...] it is an area that we have to familiarise ourselves with. There is nothing wrong with admitting that. [...] But the intricacies of something, such as trafficking, we need to know more information.”<sup>49</sup> The panels in the ‘Slavery Today’ section at the BECM were

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>46</sup> Her Majesty’s Government, “Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807-2007 – Official Magazine,” 24-27.

<sup>47</sup> “Roundtable discussion: How will museums address the UK Slave Trade,” 2007, <http://www.museumsassociation.org/13112&search=2.14>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Dr. Richard Benjamin, Head of the ISM, interview by Jennifer Carvill, June 11, 2007.

written by the former head of Anti-Slavery International, David Ulls, and only formatted by the museum team.<sup>50</sup>

Of course, the timescale and context affects what is addressed. Maria Amidu of the Understanding Slavery project was uncomfortable with “bringing young people in to look at contemporary forms of slavery [...] in relation to next year”<sup>51</sup> as she felt that it would leave them as confused as when they started. Abdullah Badwi however, the representative for the ISM, felt more comfortable with the idea as the ISM is a permanent project with a much broader remit and undetermined timescale.

### **Multiple Perspectives and Community Concern**

Previous attempts to tell the story of slavery have been met with mixed receptions, in the national press, the cities in which they are held and amongst the Black community. The ‘Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity’ exhibition at the Merseyside Maritime Museum (which later formed the basis for the ISM) represented a brave new approach by a British Museum. From the beginning of the exhibition it was made clear that the curators had sought to incorporate a distinct Afro-centric perspective. However, it was felt that the emphasis of the exhibition was limited to historical facts, and there was not enough mention of the ramifications or the European involvement in the trade.<sup>52</sup>

Despite attempts to incorporate Afro-centric perspectives the exhibition was criticised by the some members of Black community, including threats of boycott, for being too much of a ‘compromise’, citing the appointment of two ‘minders’ to the advisory committee “each sternly instructed to ensure that neither side runs away with the project.”<sup>53</sup> Consultation was a major flashpoint for the community associations. The Chairman of the Merseyside African Council complained about lack of consultation and Adam Hussein, a coordinator of the African Arts Collective said “we have been left out of the discussions. Our objections and priorities have been ignored. Blacks at the real community level were presented with a fait accompli from day one.”<sup>54</sup> However, as the first exhibition on slavery in Britain ‘Against Human Dignity’ showed both that museums were prepared to begin tackling the topic and acted to highlight the importance of community involvement and the strength of opinion of the matter. After 10 years the exhibition was seen as having “done its job, but it is elderly and dated. It is largely about the past and we must move the story on”<sup>55</sup> The development of the new museum has been informed by community voices, but still not everyone feels that their opinions have been listened to. At a public lecture held by Dr Richard Benjamin at the Merseyside Maritime Museum a Liverpoolian lady of Guyana descent spoke angrily of her feelings of exclusion from the process,<sup>56</sup> highlighting that there is no uniformity of opinion

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with Anne Lineen, Project Manager “Breaking the Chains” exhibition at the BECM, interview by Jennifer Carvill, June 27, 2007.

<sup>51</sup> “Roundtable discussion: How will museums address the UK Slave Trade.”

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Dr. Richard Benjamin, Head of the ISM, interview.

<sup>53</sup> D. Kobara, “The Chains of History,” *The Sunday Times* (London, October 30, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> D. Fleming, “Transatlantic slave trade – Exploring the legacy,” October 5, 2006, Transcript: [www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/events/africom.asp](http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/events/africom.asp).

<sup>56</sup> R. Benjamin, “Representing Slavery in Museums: Issues and Concerns” (Unpublished Lecture, Merseyside Maritime Museum, April 18, 2007).



and the fact that consultation can often take place with the more engaged members of a community.

In Bristol consultation helped to “contradict some liberal assumptions”<sup>57</sup> and had a significant impact on the development of the exhibition. One lady spoke of her concern that the bicentenary would be a replay of when ‘Roots’ was televised in the 1970s and she had been taunted in the playground and called the names of the lead characters<sup>58</sup>, which contradicted the opinion amongst the curatorial team that ‘Roots’ had been a good thing for race relations. Another example was the use of images, some used during consultation were strenuously resisted on the grounds of how they represented enslaved Africans, not just within the image, but when taken into consideration of the way in which prominent European figures would be presented via portraiture. “It just made me realise that you can’t just go with your assumptions. You have to actually get other people’s response and opinions.”<sup>59</sup> Some Pan Afrikan, African British and Black groups<sup>iv</sup> have called for a reassessment of other aspects of language used when detailing the slave trade and again there are differing opinions. The term ‘Maafa’ has been suggested instead of the ‘Transatlantic Slave Trade’ and translates from Kiswahili into English as “disaster, terrible occurrence, injustice and great tragedy”,<sup>60</sup> emphasising instead the impact on a human level, rather than in a business sense, and is not limited to the period of European involvement. Instead it covers “652 CE – Present, African conquest, enslavement, domination, oppression and exploitation.”<sup>61</sup> However, other groups have disputed its use and suggested instead “Maangamizi”, again Kiswahili but means “to vanquish, destroy”, arguing that Maafa omits the intentionality of the act and could be misinterpreted as an accident.<sup>62</sup> Other terms which have been questioned are ‘Plantation owner’ to be replaced with ‘slaver’ and ‘slave ships’ to be replaced with ‘slaving vessels’. Again the emphasis lies with less passive constructions<sup>63</sup> and ensuring that agents such as slave owners are not euphemistically referred to in ways which play down the role they played in enslaving Africans.

Despite a positive response from many quarters to the bicentenary commemorations, there has also been concern and dissatisfactions voiced, both within the sector and out of it, as to whether the Bicentenary will represent a concerted effort to incorporate the histories of slavery into their permanent narratives or whether, after the year has passed, the efforts will wane and interpretations and approaches will ultimately be little altered. The editor of Britain’s bestselling Black newspaper New Nation, Michael Eboda, expressed anger and disappointment at the way the bicentenary had been handled and found there was too much emphasis on the role of William Wilberforce, and not the role of enslaved Africans such as Queen Nanny, Toussaint L’Overture and Sam Sharpe.<sup>64</sup> Other groups have

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Anne Lineen, Project Manager “Breaking the Chains” exhibition at the BECM, interview.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> The Truth 2007 website, 2007, <http://www.truth2007.org/terminology>.

<sup>61</sup> Marimba Ani as quoted on The Truth 2007 website.

<sup>62</sup> Maafa: addressing the enslavement of Mama Africa website, 2007, [http://www.maafa.org.uk/problem\\_alternatives](http://www.maafa.org.uk/problem_alternatives),

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *The British slave trade and public memory* (Columbia University Press, 2006), 34.

<sup>64</sup> “Roundtable discussion: How will museums address the UK Slave Trade.”

campaigned against the commemorations, seeing the events as a cynical attempt to “ease their conscience [and] gain political mileage” referring to them as ‘Wilberfest’ and ‘Wilberfarce’<sup>65</sup> Whilst people of every ethnicity have participated and supported in the marking of the bicentenary, the unrest and concern of people, both white and black, attests to the still difficult and sensitive subject slavery represents in the UK and existing divisions between the communities.

### **What are considered to be the Legacies of Slavery?**

*“The legacy of slavery is one of the hardest issues in world history upon which to find agreement.”<sup>66</sup>*

In looking at the legacies of slavery in British museums, six broad themes have been identified. It must be made clear that the museums have not thought about legacy according to these categories and the categories themselves overlap and often seek to address the same concerns. Instead, it is a device by which the discussions of legacy and the final products can be compared and analysed.

It is clear, in assessing the discussions and priorities of those involved in marking the bicentenary, that there are two strands to what people consider the legacies of slavery to be; the first being the direct social, cultural and economic results of the trade and the second being those linked in terms of ‘human suffering’ such as modern day human trafficking, oppression and exploitation. Within this, it has been possible to identify six themes which have been focused upon in the various media, government, community and professional discussions. They are: Racism, Diaspora and Culture, Attitudes towards African history and the history of the slave trade, Colonialism and Africa today, UK economy and history and modern manifestations of slavery.

#### ***Racism***

Many of the institutions involved in organising events for the bicentenary have discussed racism as major legacy of slavery. Both case study museums have included information about racism and stereotyping but in different ways and to different effect. It has been argued that as long as the subject of slavery is seen only as relevant to people of African descent “and therefore African people are only ever identified in that way, there’s an immense problem.”<sup>67</sup> By including the interlinking histories of people of African descent and those of European descent into the national heritage discourses allows for the expansion of what is considered the ‘canon’ of British history and identity and promotes the inclusion agenda.

Consultation plays an important part in ensuring that people have a say in the way in which their history is presented. Anne Lineen was often surprised by the reactions she got to certain images during consultation relating to the portrayal of black people within the exhibition. Within the exhibition at the BECM however there is little that directly links racism and slavery, the ideological links are not made. Instead, aware of the dangers of

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<sup>65</sup> Operation Truth 2007, “Our Mission,” 2006, [www.operationtruth2007.co.uk/about\\_us.htm](http://www.operationtruth2007.co.uk/about_us.htm).

<sup>66</sup> D. Caciari, “The Legacy of Slavery,” 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6456765.stm>.

<sup>67</sup> “Roundtable discussion: How will museums address the UK Slave Trade.”

replaying and reinforcing the humiliation and oppression<sup>68</sup> the gallery which deals with life after the abolition focuses on black empowerment and Black Power through figures such as Marcus Garvey and the Pan African movement. The last mention of 'prejudice' is later in this section, when describing the arrival in the 1950s of many West Indian immigrants to the UK and the 'ignorance and discrimination' they faced when finding jobs and homes. However, the issue of racism is not brought up to date and by describing blatant racism in the 1950s as 'ignorance' insinuates it was only a minority view, not emphasising the continuing struggles, or indeed the links to scientific beliefs propagated by colonial institutions, amongst them museums, which still have effects today.

*"You would walk down the street and someone would shout the 'N' word at you and I always brushed it off, I used to think 'They're being stupid'. But if Anthony's death does anything, it should tell us that we must not tolerate this kind of behaviour, no matter how subtle it might seem. We are living in the Millennium, not the 1960s, and this should not be happening."*<sup>69</sup>

The mission of the ISM is in keeping with Ruth Abrams' approach<sup>70</sup> to using histories and sites of conscience in relation to modern concerns. The ISM – via brochures, radio interviews, its website and public events – has been at pains to emphasise that the museum takes a strong stance on things and that the "number one purpose of the museum is to challenge modern issues, racism and discrimination that exists in this world today."<sup>71</sup> The ISM has placed this message at its heart by naming its education facility after the murdered teenager Anthony Walker, both as a tribute and as a way to highlight the ongoing battle against racism. One of the ISM's major objects is a Klu Klux Klan outfit, displayed in the Legacy section. In response to similar concerns to those at the BECM, of the potentially damaging effects of negative imagery, a Gee's Bend quilt, a symbol of resistance was placed next to it.<sup>72</sup>

The Museum of Manchester will stage an exhibition called "Revealing Histories: Myths about race" which highlights the role that museums played in contributing to the same racist thinking that justified slavery and underlining that the division of 'race' are purely social and have no basis in science.<sup>73</sup> Visitors are asked to use the information given to question displays in the rest of the museum and given the opportunity to help shape the museum's future. In this way people are encouraged to question representations and categorisations which they take for granted in their world.

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with Anne Lineen, Project Manager "Breaking the Chains" exhibition at the BECM, interview.

<sup>69</sup> Gee Walker, mother of murdered Anthony walker, as quoted in P. Shennan, "They say time is a healer... how long is time?," *Liverpool Echo*, July 24, 2006, Evening edition .

<sup>70</sup> R. Abrams, "History is as History does: The Evolution of a Mission-driven Museum," in *Looking reality in the eye*, ed. Robert R. Janes, Gerald T. Conaty, and Museums Association of Saskatchewan (University of Calgary Press, 2006), 19-43; R. Abrams, "Harnessing the Power of History," in *Museums, Society, Inequality*, ed. Richard Sandell (London: Routledge, 2002), 125-142.

<sup>71</sup> R. Benjamin, interview by Simon Mayo, BBC Radio 5 Live, August 22, 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Dr. Richard Benjamin, Head of the ISM, interview.

<sup>73</sup> Ruth Hubbard, "Constructs of Race Difference," in *Profitable Promises: Essays on Women, Science and Health* (Monroe, Maine: University of Michigan, 2001), 98.

Whilst race has been discredited as a way to categorise people, it nevertheless has an impact on the way people view themselves and others.<sup>74</sup> Stereotypes of black people which persist to this day are often tied to slavery. By purposefully highlighting existing inequalities, museum visitors can be challenged to look at situations and events in different ways. It has been mentioned that music of black origin is a positive aspect to emphasise, and has been used in both case study museums. However, in emphasising that black entertainers do not own the processes by which the music is created,<sup>75</sup> the inequalities which still exist can be effectively and powerfully presented. Other examples include the inclusion of information regarding racist activity today.

### ***Diaspora and Culture***

The second strong aspect to come through in discussion about the legacies of slavery was the desire that not only the negative aspects be emphasised. Again, this links into the idea of weaving the histories and experiences of more recent immigrants to the UK into the national story. In highlighting the impact that the people and culture of Africa have had in Britain the massive contributions are celebrated. There was a strong concern that the story of slavery is not an empowering one for black people, especially in a school context, and teachers were worried about how they would handle mixed classes.<sup>76</sup>

It was felt that the horrors of slavery must be told, but to present people of African origin purely as victims would be counter-productive. Instead, aspects such as the rich culture of West Africa prior to slaving and elements which survived the middle passage and merged with other cultures were to be highlighted, emphasising that African people weren't simply 'reset' upon arriving in the Americas. Dr Richard Benjamin expressed the desire that people don't leave the ISM with the idea that "black equates slavery equates subjugation"<sup>77</sup> and so the achievements of people of African descent has been highlighted on a Black Achiever's Wall in the Legacy section, which brings together 75 people from the worlds of politics, music, academia, sports, civil rights, religion, art, literature, film and history and will be added to as times goes on. Thus cultural, spiritual and physical resistance are placed alongside accomplishment and the depth of black contribution can be appreciated fully, emphasising what Dr Benjamin refers to as "a fruitful, Diasporic existence"<sup>78</sup> and firmly placing the experiences and presence of black people into the national context and heritage by the permanence of the museum.

St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art held special events based around the Rastafarian movement and resistance, explaining how the religion seeks to reverse "the mindset of slave mentality", described by them as a legacy of slavery in diasporic communities, charting its development in the slums of Kingston, Jamaica and covering

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<sup>74</sup> Littler and Naidoo, *The Politics of Heritage*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> "Roundtable discussion: How will museums address the UK Slave Trade."

<sup>76</sup> RCMG, *Inspiration, Identity, Learning: An evaluation of the impact of DCMS/DfES strategic commissioning 2003-2004: National/Regional Partnerships*, 390.

<sup>77</sup> R. Benjamin, "Colourful morning," interview by A. Taylor, Colourful Radio, August 20, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

topics from Marcus Garvey to Bob Marley<sup>79</sup>, emphasising black autonomy and empowerment.

The approach at the BECM is much more focused. As the emphasis of the museum is on the Empire and Commonwealth, the narrative continues past abolition to detail the struggles faced by freed slaves in the West Indies, the establishment of towns and leads through to Black Power. The final section deals with emigration to Britain after World War Two ("Moving to Britain"), in particular Bristol, and talks about some of the struggles people faced and the Bristol bus boycott to protest about black people not being allowed to drive buses. This resulted from community consultation where older members of the community wanted their struggles to be present in the story.<sup>80</sup> Other initiatives also seek to establish a history of the black presence in Britain and the HLF talks explicitly about identifying records, graves and other features which attest to longstanding black communities,<sup>81</sup> challenging the commonly held assumption that immigration is "a post 1945 phenomenon."<sup>82</sup>

An exhibition technique concerning Diaspora and culture which was heavily present in both case study museums was that of music. The ISM features a music desk where visitors can listen to over 400 different pieces of music and there are four listening points at the BECM, where different aspects of the musical legacy of the Diaspora are demonstrated. There was some concern that by highlighting music as such a strong cultural legacy would be to reinforce the stereotypes of black people as entertainers, however consultation showed that people were proud of the musical achievements and saw it as a vital part of the story.<sup>83</sup> Other ways considered to illustrate the survival of African influences were textiles or pottery but it was felt that objects would be too difficult to obtain and that music is a more accessible and flexible medium for such a wide an audience as museum visitors. Both museums also aim to engage youth audiences<sup>84</sup> and so music can be familiar and act to catch and hold attention.

### ***Attitudes to African history and the history of the slave trade***

*"When we started we had this term "Africa pre-slavery" and we talked about it all the time. Then suddenly we realised we had to stop talking about it like that because we'd already pitched it in a very particular vein."<sup>85</sup>*

The bicentenary has been seen as an opportunity for museums to reassess the ways in which they use their exhibitions and collections to represent African history and the history of the slave trade. As mentioned earlier, the Understanding Slavery initiative has led participant museums to realise the scale of the task, not being a matter purely of education

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<sup>79</sup> Black History Month website, "Freedom Song: National Event Listings," 2007, 43, [www.blackhistorymonthuk.co.uk/downloads/FS\\_listings.pdf](http://www.blackhistorymonthuk.co.uk/downloads/FS_listings.pdf).

<sup>80</sup> Vaswani, "A Respectable Trade?," 16-19.

<sup>81</sup> Heritage Lottery Fund, *Remembering Slavery in 2007: A guide to resources for heritage projects* (London: HLF, 2007).

<sup>82</sup> Simpson, *Making Representations*, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Anne Lineen, Project Manager "Breaking the Chains" exhibition at the BECM, interview.

<sup>84</sup> Benjamin, interview; F. Khalif, "Trading in Lives," *The Western Daily Press*, 2007, 26 April 2007 edition.

<sup>85</sup> M. Amidu, "Roundtable discussion: How will museums address the UK slave Trade," 2007, [http://www.museumsassociation.org/13\\_112&search=2.14](http://www.museumsassociation.org/13_112&search=2.14).

but as a curatorial responsibility to ensure that Afro-centric perspectives are incorporated and that critiques and feedback from previous attempts at telling the story are utilised to allow museums to make positive moves forward.

The question of terminology has already been mentioned and so will not be elaborated further in this section, however it is an effective way of reframing the way in which people, European and African, are represented and the role they are given within the stories told. Another aspect which has been much discussed is the cultures and histories of West Africa prior to European involvement. Responses to previous attempts to tell the story of slavery have criticised the ethnographic nature of addressing life in West Africa; the 1994 exhibition “Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity” for example “fail[ed] to help viewers understand Africa on its own terms. It fails to communicate important national, tribal, religious, linguistic, and social differences on the African continent.”<sup>86</sup> Museums have to face the challenges that come with attempting to interpret “awkward colonial ethnographic collections”<sup>87</sup> which “encode a British struggle to control African representation”,<sup>88</sup> this is especially evident in the display of Benin bronzes which were taken as trophies during a British expedition in retaliation to the murder of several British officers who attempted to enter Benin City without permission and feature in several examples, including both case study museums. Whilst it cannot be said that this will ‘fully exorcise the ghosts of the colonial past, it can help to highlight and remind people that they are there.’<sup>89</sup>

*“If 2007 is to be a success, the stories of Equiano and other African activists, as well as those of Wilberforce and Sharpe, will have to become part of the British psyche – and museums can make that happen.”<sup>90</sup>*

Museums have identified a restriction which faces curators when trying to give agency enslaved Africans with regards to collections. Many of the objects that feature after enslavement and represent life in the Americas often relate to slave status, instruments of torture or punishment (for example shackles and punishment collars) or indirect produce of their labour (such as chinaware sugar bowls). Anne Lineen acknowledged this problem and asserted that “we have to make an effort if we are going to use those sorts of objects and these sort of images, to balance them with a sense of agency as well.”<sup>91</sup> The ISM is linked with an archaeological excavation taking place at a former plantation house and hopes to be able to display items which relate to the everyday lives of slaves. There has been a push to identify and celebrate the heroes of African descent, and to reassess the role that black people played in their own emancipation. The Wisbech and Fenland Museum, hometown to Thomas Clarkson, is staging an exhibition about Clarkson, but will also be holding events and displays about the role of Black Abolitionists.<sup>92</sup> As objects relating to the role of black abolitionists are scarce, other methods such as excerpts from books by people like Mary Prince (at the BECM) and Olaudah Equiano (at the ISM) detailing the harsh realities of slave life are used.

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<sup>86</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace, *The British slave trade and public memory*, 38.

<sup>87</sup> R. Campbell-Johnson, “Making Sense of Slavery,” *The Times* (London, August 22, 2007), 14.

<sup>88</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace, *The British slave trade and public memory*, 38.

<sup>89</sup> L. Gascoigne, “Case Study: Fred Wilson,” *Museum Practice*, no. Autumn (2005): 57-59.

<sup>90</sup> Heywood, “Breaking the chains,” 25.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Anne Lineen, Project Manager “Breaking the Chains” exhibition at the BECM, interview.

<sup>92</sup> Wisbech and Fenland Museum website, 2007, <http://www.wisbechmuseum.org.uk/clarkson/index.html>.

The use of firsthand accounts such as these autobiographies is an effective way if incorporating the voices of enslaved Africans into the exhibition and re-humanising the history. The BECM had recordings of interviews with former slaves made by the Library of Congress, accessible via headphones. Disappointingly little was made of this wonderful resource, it was easily missed, tucked under an eave and accessible only by one set of headphones. It was also somewhat out of context, situated with the “Slavery Today” section.

As regards African agency, the opening of the ISM saw a full scale replica of the slaving ship *Amistad* docked outside of the museum. The *Amistad*, made famous by the Spielberg film, was a ship on which the enslaved Africans being transported to America rebelled and commandeered the ship. The middle passage is one of the most difficult aspects to represent, previous attempts, using mannequins lying helpless on benches to show how Africans were treated like animals, inadvertently depicts them as such.<sup>93</sup> Emphasising the middle passage through the prism of rebellion does not detract from the horrors, but does allow for the enslaved Africans to be active characters in the story.

### ***Colonialism and Africa Today***

Part of the discussion about the legacies of slavery has centred on the economic and political repercussions of slavery in West Africa. This is a topic that often comes up in relation to the divisive apology and reparation debates which are tentatively referred to at the ISM. However, the bicentenary can also be seen as an opportunity for museums to address the way that slavery and colonialism affects the course of British history, despite not taking place on the geographical landmass of Britain itself. Whilst addressing the Diaspora, effects on the UK economy and racism can be seen as affecting the descendants of those who were enslaved, the history of colonialism and the underdevelopment of Africa can be seen to pick up on the reframing of African history described above. If African history is to be expanded upon and redefined so that it is viewed not only in relation to European involvement, then the histories must also be taken forward after the end of slavery to include the further struggles and repercussions which continued after the abolition of the slave trade.

Museums have established links to museums in West African countries, helping with skills and information exchange to develop dialogue and different perspectives. Both of the case study museums have developed programmes aimed at creating dialogue and understanding between youth groups in the UK, Caribbean and West Africa.<sup>94 v</sup>

Another approach is incorporating the art work and responses by West African artists. Perhaps the most well known examples are the works of Benin born Romuald Hazoumé who, using jerry cans as the principal material and so referring to the dangerous practice of transporting fuel by motorbike, offers striking images relating to the economic situation and

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<sup>93</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace, *The British slave trade and public memory*, 41.

<sup>94</sup> P. Steel, “Trading Places,” *Museums Journal*, no. March (2007): 24-27.

unending cycle of poverty faced by many in Africa today.<sup>95</sup> Embodied experiences and artistic reactions can be seen to reflect Hooper-Greenhill's notion<sup>96</sup> that the museum is no longer a straightforward educator. Instead using works, such as *La Bouche du Roi*, aims to elicit a multi-sensory, emotional reaction.

Some museums expressed concerns that in representing Africa as a "Third World" would endorse the patronising stereotype of benevolent white people saving the day, or the 'Band Aid' effect.<sup>97</sup> Instead it was suggested that the bicentenary could be linked with other events, such as Ghana's celebration of 50 years of independence, highlighting African self-determination and celebrate local successes and personalities.

*"We have these old collections with their colonial and evolutionary content. That tradition is so strong and every day we have to think about that and swim against the content stream"*<sup>98</sup>

As mentioned above, museums face a struggle to reinterpret their collections and display methods which often are bound up in colonialism. Perhaps if those underlying ideologies are made explicit, people can be encouraged look beyond purely Euro-centric perspectives and question their own ways of seeing and interpreting information.

### ***UK Economy and History***

Part of incorporating the story of slavery into the British psyche means recognising that the histories of Britain do not take place solely within the British Isles. This is again linked to the idea that slavery is an integral part of the development of modern Britain and is present within the architecture, memorials and the development of trade and industry. Manchester and surrounding area museums have sought to publicise the less obvious links of the city to slavery. Although slavery is often something solely associated with the port cities of Liverpool, Bristol and London, Manchester relied on the imports of slave grown cotton to fuel the mills on which Manchester was built<sup>99</sup> and the Museum of Edinburgh's exhibition "*It didn't happen here! Edinburgh's links with the slave trade*" deals specifically with the city's involvement to challenge the idea that Edinburgh features only within the history of abolition.<sup>100</sup> Not all museums however have been enthusiastic in investigating and acknowledging potential links to slavery. Sarah Blackstock talks about a museum in Shropshire where shackles and iron restraints were made, which are refusing to do anything,<sup>101</sup> despite being in an ideal position to link slavery to the heart of the industrial revolution.

As mentioned earlier, the history of slavery has been absent from stately homes and country estates which were paid for with the proceeds of slave labour. The bicentenary has

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<sup>95</sup> J. Morris, "Chasing Shadows: Uncomfortable Truths, Victoria and Albert Museum, London," *Museums Journal*, no. April (2007): 42-43.

<sup>96</sup> Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *The educational role of the museum* (Routledge, 1999).

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Anne Lineen, Project Manager "Breaking the Chains" exhibition at the BECM, interview.

<sup>98</sup> Gascoigne, "Case Study: Fred Wilson," 58.

<sup>99</sup> Revealing Histories website, 2007, <http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk>.

<sup>100</sup> Museum of Edinburgh, *Exhibition guide for 'It didn't happen here! Edinburgh's links with the Transatlantic slave trade'* (Museum of Edinburgh, 2007), 1-2.

<sup>101</sup> "Roundtable discussion: How will museums address the UK Slave Trade."



succeeded in drawing comparisons between the events in the West Indies and the UK. The BECM uses a juxtaposition of objects in their “Tyranny of Sugar” display, referring heavily to the work of Fred Wilson, which offers the crude work tools used in producing sugar underneath a display of a fine china tea set.

The ISM has a wall of photographs showing slavery memorials from around the world which highlights both the wide-ranging geographical locations involved in some way with the slave trade, but also the lack of any such memorial in Britain, forcing visitors to question why this might be and subtly raises the topic that Britain trails behind many other countries in acknowledging the role played in the trade and attitudes towards it.

### ***Modern Manifestations of Slavery***

The bicentenary has been marked by much discussion regarding modern slavery, the media in particular have seen the anniversary commemorations as a suitable occasion to highlight current injustice and museums have also taken part in the rhetoric. This aspect fits squarely into the ‘harnessing the power of history’ frame<sup>102</sup>, asking people to make links between transatlantic slavery and modern injustices to highlight that the fight is not yet won and there is still work to be done. Whilst the subject is almost inevitably brought up in discussion regarding the legacy of slavery, there has been little done which actively seeks to frame the topic within the museums or the bicentenary year. This could be for several reasons; museums have identified a gap in their expertise regarding this highly complex topic, uncertainty about how to curate current events<sup>103</sup> and also a feeling that the story may distract from what, for many museums, are the first attempts to really get to grips with the history of Transatlantic slavery.<sup>104</sup> The separation between modern manifestations and the other aspects of legacy discussed in earlier is evidenced in the spatial characteristics of the case study museums; the ISM will add a research centre to the museum in 2010 which will engage more with these topics<sup>105</sup> and the section “Slavery Today” at the BECM is in a small annexe, a device not used in the rest of the exhibition which has an otherwise clear route, and comes after the exhibition summary.

The complexities of modern manifestations of slavery, in Britain and abroad are such that they cannot be summarised effectively on a panel at the end of an exhibition. Different countries and continents are beset by their own problems. At least 12.3 million people may be living in a state of enslavement and 200 million children are involved in child labour.<sup>106</sup> Government figures for 2003 show that at least 4000 women and children were trafficked into the UK for prostitution alone<sup>107</sup> and recent media coverage has highlighted cases such

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<sup>102</sup> Abrams, “Harnessing the Power of History.”

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Anne Lineen, Project Manager “Breaking the Chains” exhibition at the BECM, interview; Interview with Dr. Richard Benjamin, Head of the ISM, interview.

<sup>104</sup> L. Young, “The Truth in Chains: Two centuries after Britain dismantles the slave trade, the whole issue is beset by myths, half-truths and ignorance,” *The Guardian*, March 15, 2007.

<sup>105</sup> National Museums Liverpool, “Museum brochure: International Slavery Museum,” 2007, 10.

<sup>106</sup> “International Labour Organisation website,” 2007, <http://ilo.org/global/themes>.

<sup>107</sup> M. Wroe, “The new Wilberforces have a different slave trade to end,” *The Sunday Times* (London, March 25, 2007), 6.

as child soldiers in Uganda, child jockeys in the United Arab Emirates and debt bondage in India and Pakistan<sup>108</sup>, to name but a few examples.

One possible approach that museums could adopt to highlight an individual's role is that of the BECM. The exhibition, which has a large section on the various groups which campaigned for the abolition, details how the campaign was the first real public movement, with sugar boycotts and petitions the abolition of slavery was not just an argument won in Parliament. Links could then be made to the fact that high-profile campaigns such as Live8 or the Make Poverty History campaign share a root with the events of 1807.

Other museums have sought to educate people on to how to be ethical and responsible consumers. Hull is hosting the British Association of Fair Trade Shops' AGM this year and making direct links between the local events surrounding the bicentenary and the Fairtrade Festival<sup>109</sup> and the National Museums Liverpool has the first fully fair trade museum shop in the UK. The Black History Month listings for events relating to slavery contains several events which deal solely with Fairtrade and seem to have no context or connection in a more concrete manner with the actual bicentenary or historical slavery.<sup>110</sup>

## Conclusion

Museums *are* making concerted efforts to approach the difficult subject of the legacies of slavery. These efforts manifest through both representational methods (such as the use of images, terminology and objects) and also by critical reassessment of which stories are told and how. The inclusion of personal experience, an emphasis of the role of black people in abolition and resistance has reinstated African agency and allowed for British involvement in slavery to extend beyond their role in the abolition. It has also highlighted how those efforts vary depending on the museum and the length of the exhibition. The importance of reassessing the way in which histories are told in museums and the impact of post-colonial thought is clear from discussion surrounding the bicentenary and from the exhibitions themselves. Consultation has been a crucial part in the development of both case study museums, as have reactions to previous attempts. The developments have been shown to reflect current museological thought about the role of the museum; however the change is not universal and has had varying effect. Many museums and heritage sites have been prompted into critically reassessing their collections and connections with imperial history, slavery in particular and to acknowledge the enormity of the task.

In contextualising the development of slavery exhibitions with developments in the role of museums within society and their use as tools of social change, it has been possible to highlight a varying degree of confidence across museums in the UK in fulfilling these roles. The multiple roles of the museum, as forums for discussion, reconciliation and commemoration (as well as educational institutions) have been embraced by both the ISM and the BECM and reflected by the events surrounding the bicentenary and the emphasis on legacy in the debate. Compared to the historical approach adopted in the 1990s it has

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<sup>108</sup> K. Bales, "World Slavery 2007," *The Guardian*, March 23, 2007, sec. (G2).

<sup>109</sup> Wilberforce 2007 website, 2007, [www.wilberforce2007.com/index.php?/events\\_calender/events/fairtrade\\_festival](http://www.wilberforce2007.com/index.php?/events_calender/events/fairtrade_festival),

<sup>110</sup> Black History Month website, "Freedom Song: National Event Listings."

been shown that both case study museums, and many others across the country, see the importance of bringing the story up to date and highlighting the continuing ramifications. Emphasis placed on the “fruitful diasporic existence” and the contribution made by black people to British society and culture serves to counter the often negative imagery associated to black people during slavery and also helps to promote the objective of being socially and culturally inclusive. In doing so the national story is expanded and reassessed to include the histories and experiences of those often excluded, ignored or spoken for, reframing conversations about what “British” is and including events and circumstances beyond the landmass of Britain.

However, there are many difficulties which face museums in presenting this history. The nature of the bicentenary and the developments it prompted has sparked some concern that the impact and enthusiasm for telling the stories will wane. These concerns seem well founded – most projects are short-term and based around the bicentenary rather than the slave trade in general – however, the bicentenary has heralded a new era in the way that museums and heritage institutions view their associations to slavery and has certainly offered the topic a more prominent position in the national narrative. The fact that slavery is only just becoming a part of the national consciousness and concerns about the legacy of the year itself has meant that modern manifestations of slavery are separated, either spatially or temporally, from those aspects of legacy which stem directly from the events. Also, museums see themselves as ill-equipped, in terms of personnel and experience to address the complexities of modern slavery. Thus partnerships and a diversification of the workforce, both of which take time to establish, are seen as the key to successfully addressing these issues.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Both museums are opening in the bicentenary year and represent two of the more high-profile examples. They differ in scope (something discussed further in chapters two and three) with the ISM being a permanent, national museum in its own right and “Breaking the Chains” an exhibition within the museum and running for eighteen months in the temporary exhibition space. The ISM holds transatlantic slavery as its core subject but aims to tell a “wider story” (R. Benjamin in 2007, in an interview with Jennifer Carvill), whilst the BECM is tied more specifically to the bicentenary commemorations and focuses on the abolition of the trade. Both museums are also involved in the Understanding Slavery Initiative regarding education relating to the topic and also took part in the Government Advisory Panel for the bicentenary.

<sup>ii</sup> During the interview for this study, and in a number of radio and newspaper interviews, Dr Benjamin has continually emphasised that the museum is ‘not a neutral museum’ and this it does not shy away from taking a standpoint on things, aiming to be a ‘tool for social change’.

<sup>iii</sup> The term “politically correct” having become a term of derision and used as the main term of insult in a Daily Mail review of the exhibition (J. James 1999 “Heroes no More” in the *Daily Mail*, 3rd April 1999, p12-13) which also described it as “creaking under the dead weight of Marxist and Blairite ‘we’re sorry-for-the-past’ hand-wringing’.”

<sup>iv</sup> The terms of reference are those which the groups choose to identify themselves by.

<sup>v</sup> The Adisa project in association with the BECM saw exchange trips with youth groups in Ghana and Bristol and fed into the collecting for the Breaking the Chains exhibition. The ISM has an ongoing project called “Make the link Break the Chain” which aims to create dialogue and cultural exchange between school pupils in the UK, Africa and the Caribbean (ISM website, 2007).