I would like welcome everyone here today for attending this session on Exhibiting sensitive histories. For the next 10 minutes I want to give you a brief glimpse into the world of the International Slavery Museum (ISM), giving you an insight into how it was designed and developed, and describe some of the activities and initiatives we have been involved with in the past 3 years since we opened on 23 August 2007.

I will then pass over to our three distinguished panel members. They will each be given 20 minutes which will allow sufficient time for Q & A at the end.

1. Camilo Sanchez, Museological Adviser, Museum of Independence, Bogota, Colombia  *A new Museum of Independence*

2. Paul Williams, Senior Content Developer, Ralph Applebaum Associates, New York, USA  *Designing for Hearts and Minds: The Crafting of Slavery Histories at the International African American Museum*

3. Suzanne Bardgett, Head of Department of Holocaust and Genocide History, Imperial War Museum, London, *Continuing collecting efforts for the Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum*
Overview

The International Slavery Museum (ISM) opened on 23 August 2007. Not only was 2007 the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade act but a day designated by UNESCO as Slavery Remembrance Day, the anniversary of an uprising of enslaved Africans on the island of Saint Domingue (modern Haiti) in 1791. A strong reminder that enslaved Africans were the main agents of their own liberation.

The International Slavery Museum highlights the international importance of slavery, both in a historic and contemporary context. Working in partnership with other museums and institutions with a focus on freedom and enslavement, ISM provides opportunities for greater awareness and understanding of the legacy of slavery today. It is located on Liverpool's Albert Dock, at the centre of a World Heritage site and only yards away from the dry docks where eighteenth century slave trading ships were repaired and fitted out.

Let me briefly put Liverpool into some context.

By the 1780s Liverpool was considered the European capital of the transatlantic slave trade. Vast profits from the trade helped to physically transform Liverpool into one of Britain's most important and wealthy cities. Other European ports were heavily involved too, but in total more than 5,000 slave voyages were made from Liverpool. Overall, Liverpool was responsible for half the British slave trade, and her ships carried perhaps 1.5 million enslaved Africans into slavery. The stark fact is that Liverpool was quite simply, at the epicenter of the transatlantic slave trade.
This is the reason why ISM ideally placed to elevate this subject onto an international stage. National Museums Liverpool’s previous focus on slavery, the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery, which opened in 1994 in the basement of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, won worldwide recognition and was central to the development of ISM. After more than a decade not only did the gallery need updating but the decision was taken that the subject of slavery needed greater recognition with a museum in its own right. One that would be three times the size of the previous gallery and moved into a more prominent position on the third floor of the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

ISM has been a great success, with acclaim from many quarters, and a strong response from the public in terms of visits. In 2009 the museum received a highly acclaimed Honourable Mention at the UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence awards in Paris and to date there has been upwards of 1 million visitors to the museum.

The museum is now looking to build on its success to enhance the visitor experience by improving and enlarging its facilities to create a major educational and research centre adjacent to ISM’s display galleries which is due to open in 2012. The iconic Dock Traffic Office on the Albert Dock, adjacent to the Merseyside Maritime Museum will become the new International Slavery Museum entrance and will accommodate education and research facilities, a resource centre and community spaces. The resource centre will give visitors access to slavery-related digital archives, Black British multimedia and human rights films and documentaries. It will also enable visitors to research family and local history.
In essence, we want the museum to be seen as a resource, a tool to use in a multitude of ways, ways that are not led by museum professionals but which are gently oiled and well maintained. The museum needs to develop into the kind of organism most suited to the environment of the day. In light of sweeping cuts within the public sector in 2010, this could simply be a free day out as well as a journey of exploration through the subject or tracing ones family history.

Although a museum international in scope it is first and foremost one which aims to be embraced by the local community and which through its permanent displays, exhibitions, publications and educational activities contribute to a changing public social agenda. That is, to become a tool for members of the public to use in such a way that will not only enhance their understanding of the past but how that past, and the many legacies which come with it, affect their current day-to-day activities, opportunities and aspirations. One of the ways in which we as a museum aim to do this is to become an active supporter and vehicle of social change and indeed political campaigner in the field of human rights. However, there is a school of museological thought which disagrees that it is the duty of a museum to actively engage with political issues, but rather be a neutral space for visitors to gain an objective view of the subject matter. I disagree and feel that museums are by their very nature active agents of social change and should actively seek to do so. Janet Marstine¹ had earlier echoed these sentiments: *Museums are not neutral spaces that speak with one institutional, authoritative voice. Museums are about individuals making subjective choices.*

¹ (2006: 2)
Alongside this, museum professionals and visitors alike should be conscious of the words of the historian Eric Foner who notes that *History always has been and always will be regularly rewritten, in response to new questions, new information, new methodologies, and new political, social, and cultural imperatives*. Museum professionals are guardians of one snapshot of history, one that according to David Lowenthal is *imbuing the past with present-day intention* and should make it very clear that the museum is not the final word on a subject or theme. It merely conveys to the best of the museum staffs abilities what Foner calls a *reasonable approximation of the past.*

**Ownership and voice**

These discussions were central to the development of one of the more disturbing yet constructive juxtapositions within the International Slavery Museum - the relationship between the Ku Klux Klan outfit, which was donated to ISM in 2007, just a few months before opening and our Black Achievers Wall within the Legacy Gallery. This juxtaposition lends itself to the words of Barbara Little Editor of *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* who notes: *Our experiences with our histories can leave us both heartened and dismayed, sometimes simultaneously.*

In various community consultation sessions arranged prior to opening on 23 August 2007 a recurring theme was that the museum had to carefully balance the horror and often visceral presentation of transatlantic slavery against a backdrop of resistance and indeed African and Black achievement. It was a challenge but one we managed to get just about right. It is a simple display in a

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2 (Foner, 2002: xvii)  
3 (2003: 356)  
4 (2010: 4)
sense and it does exactly what it says, it is a Black Achievers Wall, encompassing achievement across the arts, sciences and sporting world. It is just one of several attempts at addressing, and challenging, the very real issue of leaving the museum and associating African and Black history with transatlantic slavery solely, or indeed with a solely negative history.

This is especially the case for those, of all ages, who know very little about the subject of transatlantic slavery or indeed African history before their visit to the museum. It is a balancing act, the ISM team utilising all the tools at our disposal, such as working with some of the leading experts in the field, and allowing visitors to understand amongst other things British and European involvement in transatlantic slavery and their role in the enslavement of Africans, but at the same time, making Africa and Africans the central agents of the whole museum narrative. One of the ways to do this is to start with areas of achievement, often born out of resistance, a starting point to the narrative of transatlantic slavery and its legacies, a way for some audiences in essence, to begin their journey, their dialogue with the subject.

Show image of KKK outfit and BA Wall

The Ku Klux Klan outfit is central to our Racism and Discrimination section of the Legacy Gallery, which also includes a number of objects which depict racist and stereotypical imagery, as well as multimedia presentations depicting subjects such as the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the killing of the young Black British man Anthony Walker in 2005, who gives his name to the learning base within ISM, the Anthony Walker Education Centre. The family of Anthony were
originally contacted to seek permission (not legal but moral) to use footage and images relating to a press conference given by the family. Anthony’s mother and sister visited the museum and saw the rushes of the film. Their support was given. It is indeed difficult to measure the understanding and communicating of the value of museums’ work to the public, however, when the sister of Anthony recently referred to the Anthony Walker Education Centre as ‘my brothers room’ there had indeed been a very satisfying and thought provoking shift of ownership taking place.

It was a significant step for the museum not only to seek out legal permission but moral permission from relatives of an individual featured within the display galleries. Not only was this done because the family lived in the Liverpool area but it seemed only right, especially when ISM enthusiastically claims that we are not neutral.

As soon as one walks into the Legacy Gallery it is difficult not to catch a glimpse of the Black Achievers Wall, it has a central prominent position. It sits close to the Ku Klux Klan outfit but is not dominated by it - achievement versus oppression. Further investigation of this gallery would also allow you to interact with our Cultural Transformation section of which our Music Desk, looking at the global influence of African music, is a central and popular feature.
Collections

I will briefly discuss what the ISM team have learnt from developing exhibitions and permanent collections around subjects what have at times been regarded as the unrepresentable. I will also focus on the ethical and moral dimensions which we had to negotiate when considering how we displayed and interpreted sensitive issue and sensitive objects. 2009, through capital funds from the Department of Culture, media and Sport we were able to develop the position of Collections Development officer as part of the ISM team. The remit of the post was to ‘facilitate collections based work for the opening of the ISM Phase Two education and resource centre in 2011 and to further develop the International Slavery Museum’s future collections policy’. It was central to the role of the post that a new updated and contemporaneous collections policy in line with the aims and objectives of ISM was developed. At the heart of such a policy would be a large emphasis on contemporary slavery, and as such, the associated sensitivities.

Within six months, partly due to the need for a revised ISM collections policy in light of new relationships and partnerships with human rights organisations such as Stop the Traffick, and Anti-Slavery International the following policy was developed alongside strands such as Black British and Diaspora memorabilia; Transatlantic Slavery and Liverpool social history strands):
A collection which represents contemporary forms of slavery. For ISM and CSIS (Centre for the Study of International Slavery) to be the main depositories for objects and research relating to contemporary forms of slavery. The sensitive nature of the collection makes it preferable to collect oral histories with objects as they would set the tone of how the object is interpreted. A collection based on the individuals’ experience of being enslaved. To collect objects associated to contemporary slavery as defined by Anti-Slavery International i.e. bonded labour, early/forced marriage, forced labour, slavery by descent, trafficking and child labour.

Policies in place the ISM team embarked on putting aspects of it into practice. A major feature of which were plans for a Collections Centre (image) located in the resource centre of the Dock Traffic Office.

**Show Collections Centre image**

The area would be a publicity accessible area with storage cases and the facility to display objects or archive documents of the week/month, transforming the collections area into a resource. A space within the collections area would allow for daily curatorial sessions with some of the objects. However with the proposed openness and accessibility of the area came a number of ethical dilemmas. The aim was for the ISM collections to be readily accessible by members of the public but due to the nature of some of the current objects, and ideas of future acquisitions, various issues of display had to be discussed.

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5 Robinson & Carl-Lokko, 2009: 4
The team knew they could be on steep learning curve as the museum was considering having one of the few, if not only, permanent contemporary slavery collections. But decisions which needed to be made regards the way that these objects were to be displayed would be very much informed by current working practices and experiences.

**Show image of Missing**

The first tangible recent acquisitions to the International Slavery Museum collection, which forms part of our Contemporary Slavery collection was a work of contemporary art known as “Missing” by the artist Rachel Wilberforce. Wilberforce is a contemporary artist working with photography, film, video, installation and live art intervention. This 2007 series of photographs depict real-life environments where human trafficking has taken place. The artist Rachel Wilberforce developed a working partnership with the police, who allowed her access to these crime scenes. What is striking from our visitor comments cards is the idea that slavery was something which happened in the past. These environments are only an example of how slavery is still very much a contemporary issue.

Rachel Wilberforce’s practice reflects on the human condition through psychological, cultural and social constructs; playing on the tension between reality and fiction, the familiar and the uncanny, and the public/private. An ongoing interest lies in family dynamics and archive as well as the status of society through the idea of spectacle and theatricality that is inherent within the everyday.
Through a theatrical presentation of urban and suburban infrastructures in the UK, the work points to the phenomenon of sex trafficking and prostitution: interiors and exteriors of working, derelict or re-purposed massage parlours, brothels and flats. The images are devoid of people and reveal the imprint of human activity outside of and in close proximity to the action. Missing responds to the psychological issues of sexual exploitation: loss of identity, sense of displacement and violation of human rights as well as the clandestine nature of the crimes.

**Shoe ankle bracelets**

Following on from *Missing*, after a series of meetings with Anti-Slavery International, the museum acquired several ankle bracelets which had been collected by Anti-Slavery International, and ‘worn’ by modern day domestic slaves in Niger. It represents the importance of ISM’s work to develop it’s collections in this area and to campaign on the issue of contemporary forms of slavery. With the help of ASI the museum also secured permission to use the personal history of the person who wore the object. It was decided that this would add an extra dimension to the object. It would humanize the subject and as a result might make the visitor want to get involved.

It is that last statement which is often the most controversial, due to the fact that many museum commentators believe that museums should indeed be neutral spaces. Objects such as this which truly emphasize the future strategy of the museum. Hard-hitting, unflinching objects which have such an effect on the visitors, as well as current supporters and funders, to galvanize support for the campaigns it sees fit to endorse. But the team realized from a very early stage
that there is a fine line between visceral displays of such highly emotive and sensitive objects and turning the museum into what a member of the curatorial team called a ‘shop of horrors’. We discussed in detail where this type of collecting policy might lead ISM and it can indeed be a dark place. This was no better illustrated than discussions around examples of objects which we would actively collect for display which could relate to high profile cases of trafficking. Discussions centered around quite an unremarkable object in itself but one with horrific connotations when the context was explained.

Do we for instance exhibit personal effects of victims of the Morecambe Bay Cockling tragedy in 2004 where twenty-three Chinese workers were drowned during rising tides to highlight the exploitation of workers by gang masters? Although the emergency services were alerted by a mobile phone call made by one of the workers, only one of the workers was rescued from the waters. Would a display centered on this last frantic call highpoint the issues which led to the tragedy or would this make the museum a macabre spectacle?

Equally, would the contents of a raided brothel highlight the blight of human trafficking? Difficult decisions which need addressing by the museum, but one which does have experience and indeed the resources to do so, and as such we must take that step, however difficult.
Conclusion

From the outset, any museum which at its core focuses on the subject of slavery, historical or contemporary must be prepared for the sensitivities which must be overcome in the production and delivery in either permanent or temporary displays or exhibitions. At times this can take its toll, but it through the sharing ideas, both positive and negative, with colleagues form museum with similar collections that you are able to move forward with new ideas in the hope that the public appreciate that you are trying to make a difference.

Thank you.

Introduce first speaker.

Bibliography


