MUSEUMS AND COMMUNITIES

Curators, Collections and Collaboration

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Community Consultation in the Museum

The 2007 Bicentenary of Britain's Abolition of the Slave Trade

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Community consultation has become a dominant theme in museological debates and is often an integral part of attempts to broaden museum audiences and address social exclusion issues. In 2007, museums were presented with an opportunity to engage African-Caribbean communities, often counted among the traditionally excluded audiences, in the development of exhibitions marking the bicentenary of Britain's 1807 act to abolish the slave trade. However, as public debate about the bicentenary grew, museums found themselves caught in a dilemma. On one hand, they faced governmental calls for a bicentenary that would celebrate the act of abolition and the so-called moral leadership of Britain. On the other hand, African-Caribbean community groups argued that the importance of the bicentenary lay in the opportunity to acknowledge obscured and hidden histories and legacies. For some, this recognition, it was hoped, would lead to an apology from the government. In this chapter, drawing on interview data with museum staff and community representatives, we explore some of the tensions and issues that arose during 2007 between community groups and museums. Museums were often faced with the dilemma of presenting a balanced exhibition while juggling the competing demands of communities and funding bodies with governmental and wider public expectations about the bicentenary, which made community consultation in this context confronting and challenging. For their part, many of the community representatives we interviewed expressed feelings of frustration with both the consultation process and its outcomes.

Methodology

During 2007 and 2008, interviews were undertaken with curatorial staff, outreach officers, and community representatives as part of a wider study entitled 1807 Commemorated[1] carried out at the University of York between 2007 and 2009. In total, twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with community representatives who had worked with five museums. Staff members from these museums were also interviewed,

as were staff members from a further three museums. Eighty-eight museum staff members were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. In addition, a workshop was held at the Museum of London Docklands with individuals involved in community consultations at a number of museums. The workshop was an open-ended discussion of community consultation issues and experiences with eleven participants. Approximately 100 invitations were sent by e-mail and post to organizations and individuals involved in consultations to participate in this workshop, eleven of whom were able to participate. It is important to note that follow-up telephone calls and e-mails were made to invited participants, with many still declining to attend. The reasons given, or impressions formed, during these communications were that many felt too disillusioned with the consultation processes they had engaged in and/or considered that spending more time on the issue was too difficult or likely to be counterproductive.

Consultation Models Employed by Museum Partners

Four consultative models were employed by the museums involved in this study. The most common was the development of small consultative or advisory groups, often consisting of four or five people from community groups, sometimes alongside academics and other advisors. Discussions with those interviewed revealed that community members of these groups often expressed a strong or shared sense of ownership of the exhibition being developed. However, they also expressed concerns about the representativeness of such groups, noting that the diversity of community interests could not be canvassed or explored by small advisory or cultural groups. Moreover, these groups tended to be formed through existing museum networks. The tendency was to invite individuals who had previously worked with the museum on other topics or to get such people to make recommendations about who should be approached. While pragmatically a useful way of developing committees, it did limit the ability of the committee to represent the diversity of opinion in stakeholder communities. The well-documented tendency of museums to avoid conflict and controversy will also mean that such committees will more likely be populated with individuals with whom the museum will feel "safe" (see Lagerkvist 2006; Lynch and Aberti 2010: 3; Watson 2007: 2). Conversely, some museums will work with the most vocal and provocative community representatives in order to create a positive and public image of a museum "engaging with communities"; in this context, the substance and representative content of that engagement may be questionable.

A few museums worked with larger groups gleaned through open invitations advertised in local newspapers. The groups formed were often between thirty and forty individuals and were quite diverse. The utility of this second model was that it was perceived as more representative of community diversity, although many community representatives we interviewed, who had participated in such groups, noted a lack of a sense of "ownership" was often generated within large groups. This often caused people to drop out of the group, as did the tendency for vocal community voices to dominate. For

museum staff, this was often a harder group to interact with, especially given the diversity of opinions expressed. However, this diversity also made this group very useful for surveying wider community interests and concerns.

The third model adopted by some museums was to conduct individual interviews with a range of community representatives, as well as undertaking one-off focus group or workshop discussions. This model allowed individual voices to be expressed and enabled wider representation than the first model, while the focus groups and workshops provided forums for discussion and debate. Conversely, however, this model was often time consuming for museum staff, and did not lead to the sense of engagement or ownership of the exhibition processes that, as discussed later, was so important to many community representatives we interviewed.

The fourth model involved the development of specific subprojects, sometimes running alongside the main exhibition. Such projects included art installations and oral history projects, which communities organized with support from museums. Community members involved in such projects were very positive about both the projects and their relationship with the museums in question. Many commented that they felt actively engaged in the bicentenary process and that they gained a range of skills from their involvement. However, some expressed disappointment that their work was often peripheral to the main exhibition and that they had little or no input into the overall exhibition. Others noted that it was often a shame that their art or oral history project was only housed within the museum, and suggested that aspects of the exhibition and their projects would have been usefully displayed also in community centers (Workshop transcript: 9f). This was particularly stressed by the fact that many members of African-Caribbean communities, particularly younger people, were traditionally among those groups who felt excluded from museum visiting. The fact that many of these projects were additional to the main exhibition, and were seen by the museums as the focus of community consultation rather than the main exhibition, highlighted for some a sense of exclusion. For instance, one community leader noted:

> [O]ne of the young people said why is it always white people always talking about slavery and it is (laughs), if you look around and you can see it's white people being employed to talk about slavery, it took a young person to point that out. (07ComC25 2007)[2]

Although the art project was designed to give the community some voice in the exhibition, its peripheral relationship to the main exhibition highlighted for this young person the sense to which dominant versions of the history of enslavement were still promulgated. This impression was reinforced when, as some museums acknowledged doing, community voices were used as a means to fill up empty gallery spaces. The lack of objects that related to the history of enslavement and its legacy constituted a major concern for the majority of curators we interviewed: ". . . that was frustrating because we just did not have the objects. How do you create an exhibition without any objects?" (07comM3 2007). For some curators, the production of artwork and oral history displays by the communities themselves was reckoned an effective way of "contemporary collecting." As one museum curator stated:

> I mean from our point of view the consultative group is really the core of the whole project . . . because we knew from the outset as a museum that we had a couple of big problems; the first one is that we had virtually no slavery collection at all . . . [communities were important] to actually help us assemble a collection around which to build the story of the gallery we were going to tell. (07comM90 2007)

While the incorporation of community voices into exhibitions can be very affective, how and why that is done will also send messages, however unintended, to museum audiences and communities.

Despite the issues identified here, it is important to note that community interviewees stressed the inclusion of what they often referred to as "authentic," "real," or "unique" people voices in exhibitions. As one museum professional noted:

> Oral history for them is very important, that we sit down and talk, that's the way history and stories are told. Rather than the written word. (07comM3 2007)

For some, listening to and integrating alternative and diverse voices into the gallery space did challenge the authoritative nature of museum institutions as conveyors of absolute and accurate scientific truths. As one museum professional observed:

> If it [the exhibition] was to have any meaning at all it was about finding a way to enable those voices [voices of underrepresented groups] to be heard, to be able to challenge so called authoritative histories which are the preserve of museums. (07comM48 2007)

Each model had its utility and limitations—and indeed it is not possible, or perhaps even desirable, to nominate which model was the most useful. Consultation is, or at least should be, about dialogue, and each situation will necessitate different strategies for developing dialogue (Lagerkvist 2006: 60). Notable about each of these models is that no one we spoke to considered that dialogue had been well facilitated in the consultation practices with which they had been engaged. Also notable is that, in each case, meetings, focus groups, interviews, and so forth were held *at* the museum. This tendency, at least for one participant, reinforced the sense that the museums were in control of the process:

> And yet, when I look at a museum and they say what a consultation is, they mean they invite people in and give them a cup of tea and a biscuit. That to me I find, going into somebody else's territory, I find it discombobulating. I don't find it comfortable. I found very few museums that went out to community centres, art centres, places, health centres, went out to where the people are and talked to them there, on the territory that the people felt comfortable. (Workshop transcript: 5)

At issue here was not so much the specific model of consultation used, but the different expectations and understandings of consultation held by museum staff on one hand and community representatives on the other. Significantly, *how* consultation was done only reinforced this disjuncture for many community representatives and undermined the stated philosophical commitments of museum staff to the idea of inclusive consultation.

Community Concerns and Expectations

What needs to be noted at the onset is that all of the museum staff members we spoke to were committed to community consultation and saw it as an important, if not vital, part of the exhibition process. Indeed, many community representatives themselves recognized the commitment of staff, and appreciated the difficulties some staff faced in undertaking consultation. This included their own inexperience in consultations, the confronting nature of consultation and the topic at hand, and the criticisms some staff faced from other staff about what they were doing and why (for fuller discussion see Smith and Fouseki 2011). As one person noted:

> It was a very difficult process because the curators and the museum staff were terrified. It's a very difficult history, but they took grace from actually engaging with people directly. (Workshop transcript: 6)

Given this commitment, why did community representatives overwhelmingly report feelings of significant frustration? Fouseki (2010) has identified the object-centric concerns of museums as one of the key issues at work here. Community representatives focused much more on how the exhibition as a whole was going to impact both community and wider public perceptions of African and Caribbean culture and history, and what, in turn, that would mean to contemporary public attitudes to African-Caribbean British people and their communities. As Prior notes, the history of enslavement and the consequences it had for Africa, the Caribbean, and Britain had not been adequately acknowledged by museums in the past, and thus a lot of expectation was riding on the exhibitions to mark the bicentenary (2007: 202). As we have argued elsewhere, political recognition and all the material and symbolic consequences of this for communities was at stake here (Smith and Fouseki 2011). In developing our argument, we drew on the work of Nancy Fraser (2000) to illustrate how museums become implicated in struggles for social justice through the politics of recognition. They become implicated due to the power and authority of museums to represent and define histories and cultures (Bennett 1995; Witcomb 2003). This authority has been well recognized in the museum literature and within policy debates and social inclusion and other diversity policies, which may be seen as attempts to address these issues. As Lagerkvist notes, the politics of difference, in which the unique identity of groups and their distinctiveness from other groups is recognized, can be identified in the diversity policies of museums (2006: 55–56). Despite these debates and policy initiatives, much of the stress and frustration over consultations during 2007 was created by the two very different aims of communities and museums. Communities were often concerned to see the exhibitions as opportunities for the recognition of the consequences for contemporary Britain of the history of enslavement and the exploitation of Africa. Museums attempting to present a balanced exhibition wanted to simply canvass and collect community views (Smith and Fouseki 2011). The extent to which diversity or social inclusion policies were driving the consultative process does not seem to have been adequately realized (see Smith and Fouseki 2011). For communities, consultation was about *working through* what was at stake for them, what they needed the exhibitions to say and acknowledge, while also working through the difficult emotional affect of engaging with this history and its continuing legacies for individuals and their communities:

> Only Friday, Thursday sorry, I found out about my great, great grandfather; who owned him as a slave, and that only came out of the slave records, which were released last year . . . so I'm still on an emotional rollercoaster right now . . . That's part of what I wanted to say. Just to say we need justice not necessarily anything else . . . (07comC114 2008)

> When I was younger, when you mentioned slavery . . . we didn't want to acknowledge it, we didn't want to think about it, we didn't want to feel it, because we . . . have this image in our head of being inferior people. (07ComC101 2008)

> Because people do tend to bring their own personal baggage to this history and it's unresolved, and it's impossible to deal with this history without actually addressing some kind of pain and harm that's in there. So time is needed. (Workshop transcript: 6)

For the museums, it was ultimately about getting an exhibition together. It may also have been about listening to consultative groups and representatives, but the final product of consultation was, pragmatically, the development of an exhibition, a professional product, within a defined timetable. The political ramifications of such exhibitions, while of concern to museum staff members, would never touch them in the way it would and did communities. As one representative noted:

> I want people to be aware that there is some fantastic history of queens and kings [of Africa] of the time . . . and when an English person sees you next time is not just seeing a black colour, they are seeing a person who . . . played a part in developing the world. (07comC74 2007)

We have argued that this disjuncture, and the failure of museums to understand the wider political contexts and ramifications of exhibitions, was at the heart of the tensions and frustrations felt by both staff and community representatives (Smith and Fouseki 2011). However, in this chapter, we want to explore some of the practical issues that helped to facilitate and underline this disjuncture. One of these was the issue of time. Many of the exhibitions were developed over relatively short timeframes due to the

restricted period created between the securing of funding and the need to develop an exhibition that met a commemorative date:

> It wasn't enough consultation because if you know you have the money in August you can only . . . you can only have five consultations at the most, once a month . . . (07ComC74 2007)

Thus, the community priority to *debate,* and not simply to *display,* was further undermined by time limitations. As one community representative noted, time was needed to not only discuss and debate issues in meetings with museum staff, but to take these issues back to communities so that the communities themselves could debate and discuss the issues raised in consultation meetings:

> When I came on [to the consultative group] as an individual I said these things are too big for me I have to share with the members of my community. (Workshop transcript: 20).

Adding to this problem was the degree to which museums and their staff assumed community representatives could and did speak for entire communities. Communities are, of course, diverse and may not have a united view on any given topic, let alone dissonant and contested ones. Representatives at the workshop voiced concern about the stress placed on them to represent diverse community views, an issue made all the more problematic by the lack of time available for representatives to go back to communities and get feedback themselves.

A great deal has been written in the literature on museum consultation about the need to develop long-term relationships with communities (for example, Crooke 2005, 2007; Kelly 2004; Kelly and Gordon 2002). However, this is not a relationship with a homogeneous hermetically sealed unit—communities are diverse, divisive, and changeable—and thus any relationships, of necessity, will need time to adjust and develop as the needs and concerns of communities change and develop (Smith and Waterton 2009; Waterton and Smith 2010). Obviously, such relationships need time, and that was not made available in this context due to a range of constraints not always controlled by museums. However, the lack of available time sent, or reinforced, the message that communities were not being listened to. Many communities desired to develop long-term relationships with museums, a desire often shared by museum staff, but which was inevitably not realized due to time constraints, but also because consultation was seen to have been achieved and completed once the exhibition was put in place. Some of those interviewed expressed regret that consultation had finished once the exhibit opened, as one community representative observed about the attitude of the museum they worked with: "it's kind of been we've done the work and we're moving onto different groups" (07ComC25 2007). The lack of debate, negotiation, and possibility of long-term commitment in the consultation process helps explain frustrations, despite the attempt of many museum staff members to ensure critical issues and debates were addressed in the gallery space.

At issue is not so much what the exhibitions displayed finally (although of course it was an issue), but community representatives' overall experience in the consultation process. The ability to have active involvement in the exhibition development was for participants as much a gesture of honest recognition and social justice as the actual exhibition outcome and content. An exhibition product without honest engagement with the African-Caribbean community was defined as simply a tokenistic, box-ticking exercise that aimed to fulfill the quantitative DCMS (Department for Culture Media and Sport) Performance Indicators or the funding criteria of nongovernmental funding bodies:

> What became clear to a lot of delegates, a lot of the people participating, even though the people working with us didn't view it that way, it was a rubber stamping exercise . . . we've already chosen the pieces, and we're only working with the artefacts in our collection. (07comC107 2008)

> I felt that the museum was doing it was like a requirement for them to do those meetings . . . it was like ticking a box. (07ComC102 2008)

> Whenever you do a consultation, it really does feel like you're just talking. There is no political will to change. (Workshop transcript: 11)

The lack of ownership of the consultative and exhibition development process was a theme that emerged again and again in interviews with community representatives, for instance:

> I can't honestly [see how] people who were engaged in this programme could say that they owned this project because they were not allowed to own it, they were not allowed to own it. (07ComC77 2007)

This concern over a lack of ownership, or of feeling that they played an active role, was not only reinforced by the limitations of time, but by the *timing* of when community consultation commenced in the exhibition development processes. Community participants expected to be consulted at *all* exhibition stages *before* any firm decisions were made about the aims, scope, nature, or content of the exhibition. Indeed, some argued that the very decision to have an exhibition in the first place on the topic of enslavement should have been part of consultations (Workshop transcript; 07ComC101 2008):

> Consultation should have started from the moment they had the idea of designing the gallery, they should have brought people on board from the very very beginning ok? They should have been open and prepared to take on the views and I know this is a very difficult thing . . . they should have brought them on board from the very beginning, they should have been involved in looking at the objects, they should have been involved in looking at the material and telling them what they see, what they think and what they understand and that should be part of it. (07ComC77 2007)

> [Community officers were often] an afterthought or you are thought about in the beginning and then you are marginalized, or you are pushed aside or you are dropped kind of thing and that has happened [here]. (07comC105 2008)

While many people stressed the importance of being involved at the beginning of an exhibition, they also stressed the importance of being involved at the very end. As one curator noted, the final design of an exhibition can differ markedly from how it was envisaged during development and consultations, and thus one of the things she learned from the consultation process was that she would:

> put the designers on board far earlier, everyone needs to be part of that process and everyone needs to be signed up to that process and I think . . . one thing I can learn from that process that everyone needs to be on board and from as early as possible. (07ComM103 2007)

Time has been a significant constraint in the consultation experiences of both museum staff and community representatives. Further constraints added to the frustrations and tensions reported to us. One of these was the lack of understanding of diversity issues, and many community representatives commented that further diversity training was needed in museums to increase understanding of equity, multicultural issues, and the continuing political and social experiences of minority community groups. This was also highlighted against the observation of the relative lack of employment of African or Caribbean British staff at curatorial levels within museums. As one person noted, the lack of success of community consultation occurred because:

> I think it was the lack of understanding of black people and black experience and it was a lack of understanding by the white people in positions and jobs. (07comC102 2008)

Conversely, the lack of understanding on the part of communities about how museums work was another significant issue. Discussion at the workshop noted that communities often needed training, or briefings at the start of the consultation processes, about the management structure of museums and the overall exhibition development process. Providing information about how the museum works, in particular its management structures, funding pressures, time pressures, and other logistical and professional limitations on staff, was felt by many community representatives as something that would help prevent misunderstandings between museums and communities. It could, it was hoped, also foster a sense of community ownership of the consultation process and its potential outcomes for communities.

Of concern to members of the workshop was the lack of accountability of museums in the consultation process. This arises from a combination of issues, including the amount of time given to the consultation process, the impressions and beliefs by many that decisions were made prior to consultations commencing, and the degree to which many felt they were not listened to. These factors again tended to undermine the sincerity of the stated motivations of institutions for consultations, and a strong perception arose that museums were paying lip service to the social inclusion requirements of DCMS and the Labour government:

> This exercise? Tick, tick, tick. On to something new. So the real test of all this, the kite-mark aspect, is how are these organisations looking at their permanent exhibitions because that's the real test I think of whether any of these consultations mattered or made a difference. Because the whole story of these museums should now be altered in some way. (Workshop transcript: 18)

Moving from Consultation to Negotiation

Community consultation is by nature fraught and difficult. What makes for "good" consultation will also be hard to measure, as so much is usually at stake for community groups, and indeed for museums themselves, and there is such a diversity of opinion about any given topic that it is not possible to satisfy everyone. The simple observation that community consultation is difficult and confronting is an important one to make and acknowledge. Such an acknowledgment is vital for the possibility of the development of long-term dialogue. As Lagerkvist notes, there are no short cuts to community inclusion in museums:

> The task is essentially to keep the dialogue alive, to negotiate and renegotiate and thereby to find a balance and move positions forward in each separate case of community involvement. (2006: 60)

The point here is that community consultation is a continuous dialogue, and creating the attitudes and cultures within museums and the wider cultural sector that will allow and facilitate this is what is ultimately important. Moreover, consultation is all about *negotiation.* It is not about telling or about simply listening to viewpoints, it is about engaging in debate and negotiation. *Community engagement* or *community negotiation* are perhaps better terms to use than *consultation,* which all too often invokes a sense of simply telling and informing (Clarke 2002; Greer et al. 2002).

However, systemic and institutional issues prevent dialogue and negotiation either from occurring or from being effective. Institutional racism, as Lynch and Aberti (2010) note, is still alive and well, and the call by community representatives for diversity training of museum staff is not an insignificant observation. The assumptions embedded in the heritage sector about whose history and heritage matter are well documented (Littler and Naidoo 2004, 2005). The dominant and pervasive assumptions about heritage, defined as they are by the authorized heritage discourse, are that heritage is comfortable, familiar, good, and "white" (Smith 2006, 2010; Smith and Waterton 2011). As Stuart Hall observes:

> The "peculiarity" of Afro-Caribbeans—that they are simultaneously deeply familiar, because they have lived with the British for so long, and ineradicably different because they are

> black—is regarded by most of the British (who have never been asked by their "Heritage" to spare it a thought) as culturally inexplicable. (2005: 34)

Without continuing debate within the heritage and museum sector about cultural diversity issues, consultation practices will all too often continue to be tokenistic. More pragmatic, but nonetheless vital in the development of negotiation and dialogue, is the provision of sufficient time. It is perhaps a somewhat obvious suggestion that museum exhibition practices need to build into them sufficient lead up time for consultation. However, it is an observation that cuts to the core of perceptions that communities were not listened to or valued—the more time and investment given to communities the more investment communities will have in museums and their activities. Moreover, this is not just a museum issue; the bodies that fund exhibition development also need to understand these issues as they influence timetabling through the way they disperse finds and the conditions they set.

Community consultation, as well as being about dialogue and negotiation, is also about learning about and recognizing each other. Representatives reported on the need for training about museum practices and operations. Just as museum staff members need to learn about the histories and the experiences of communities with which they work, so do communities engaged in work with museums need to be given access to knowledge about exhibition development. Some of the community representatives interviewed noted they only gradually learned about some of the constraints placed on staff, and on what exhibitions could or could not achieve. Thus, they considered that an honest assessment and discussion of what constraints staff faced at the start of the consultative process would help alleviate some misunderstandings and frustrations.

Conclusion

What was significant about the results of the interviews is how similar the tensions and issues are to those experienced and documented in other consultative contexts. The international literature on community consultation, particularly that with Indigenous communities, documents many of the issues we have identified here—in particular the need for honest communication about the possibilities and constraints of what can and cannot be done in exhibitions, the development of trust and long-term relationships, and the miscommunication that occurs over the value and meanings of objects (see, for instance, Greer 2010; Greer et al. 2002; Hemming and Rigney 2010; Perkin 2010; Smith and Wobst 2005; Zimmerman 2005). At the crux of the issues, both in the United Kingdom and internationally, is a disjuncture over the needs and aspirations of community groups—this may seem obvious, but a failure by museum staff to understand how exhibitions feed into the wider political and emotional needs of communities underlines the failures and frustrations of community consultation. A very real sense emerges out of the interviews we did with community groups that the exhibitions were a moment that would represent something big—that they would be an opportunity for political and historical recognition. This does not imply there was a naïve perception in communities that exhibitions would immediately bring about social justice, or access to resources to improve equity; rather they were perceived as a crucial step in the struggles for recognition and the social justice claims that flow from this. Understanding the way museums as cultural authorities can be and are used in any struggle for recognition and social justice is crucial in understanding and implementing community consultation. Successful community consultation requires not only reflections upon the specific issues we have raised here, but a deeper philosophical and contextual understanding of both the power differentials that exist between curatorial staff and communities, and the power of museums to *be* a legitimizing resource in social and cultural conflicts.

Notes

1. The 1807 Commemorated Project was funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council Knowledge Transfer Fellowship (2007–2009) when both authors were based at the University of York, UK. Further details about the project and its outcomes can be found at the project's main website: www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/. A second website, funded by the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), can be found at www.york.ac.uk/1807commemorated/index.html. Toolkits developed from the project's findings may be found at this site, together with a toolkit for community consultation at www.york.ac.uk/1807commemorated/commun.html. The authors wish to acknowledge our colleagues on the project, Geoffrey Cubitt and Ross Wilson, and to thank all those who allowed us to interview them for this project.
2. Interviews cited in this chapter have been given reference numbers to maintain the anonymity of the individuals interviewed. The referencing system for interviews is as follows: "07Com" refers to the overall 1807 Commemorated project from which this study derives; the use of a following M or C refers to either museum staff or community representative; the following number is the sequential number of the interview out of a total of 128; while the final number refers to the year in which the interview was undertaken.

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