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Representing the Diaspora:
Performances of 'Origin' and 'Becoming' in Museums

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The museum exhibitions set in place for the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade of 1807 have provided a means to reassess identity in Britain. How individuals construct and reconstruct their sense of region, nationality, ethnicity and cultural heritage in the face of a traumatic history is a concern of enormous resonance. As issues of identity within Britain are negotiated in the context of multiculturalism, European expansion, immigration, and global environmental and security concerns, the stories we choose to tell ourselves and others about who we are become essential issues. The role of the museum in these processes is significant as they can provide the spaces, materials and resources for the education and negotiation in the formation of identities. As Britain as a nation confronts its own history of complicity in the Atlantic slave trade, issues of racism, prejudice, equality and social justice come to the fore. Considering the magnitude of these subjects an issue is expressed in this paper over the museum representation of an African Diasporic identity. In this paper the 'poetics of exhibition' will be examined in two museums in Britain which have responded to the bicentenary year with detailed and proficient displays on the history of enslavement. Based upon large-scale audience surveys carried out at these two museums the ways in which those who associate themselves with the African Diaspora and who also connect or disassociate themselves with the exhibitions will be studied. It will be argued through this analysis that these museum whilst providing an excellent and sensitive study of enslavement are being interpreted by its audience as representing a particular model of identity formation which excludes the consideration of some aspects of the African Diasporic identity. This paper will offer in place an affirmation of an alternative model of representation, one which can respond to the particularities and the multifaceted nature of the African Diaspora.

Memory and Identity

The use of memory of the past, of narratives of historical events and figures to mobilise and articulate national identities in the present is a well-established field of study (see Gillis 1994; Schwartz *et al* 1986). It is through the evocation of a collective memory that governments and institutions have been able to attribute particular cultural or ethnic characteristics to a group or nation (Müller 2002). Indeed, the very emergence and consolidation of nation-states in eighteenth-century Europe was largely based on the creation by national governments of a shared memory and tradition amongst their peoples (see Hobsbawm 1983). This shared memory and identity was located in the concepts of belonging, *pro patria*, of attachment to space, place, time and culture (Schama 1995). The significance of 'origins' was reinforced in this schema; as to belong was to have attachments and roots. The phrase 'born and raised' aptly describes this view of identity. This consideration of identity formation has been pervasive since the Enlightenment,

structuring concepts of who belongs in the nation-state and who does not (Derrida 1992: 79). The notion of a collective memory within a nation is considered to be one of the key integrating processes within society; a sense of a common past, of shared stories, is considered one which enables individuals to coexist alongside one another (Pennebaker 1997). Inevitably, if these claims are made for a singular national collective memory, whilst including some members of society, it must be remembered that it will also exclude others participating within the nation-state (Radstone 2000). Therefore, the formation of a specific national or group identity, ingrained within a collective memory, could be said to rely and necessitate upon the construction of 'the other' in society (Foucault 1998). This 'other' is constituted by the Diasporic identities (after Said 1979: 15). The identities of Diasporas are those who are specifically not included in the national narratives, they are those who do not fit into the limited definitions of 'originating' and 'belonging' within the nation.

The Identities of Diasporas

The identities which derive from Diasporas are inevitably located in opposition to the narratives of belonging which are based upon the idea of the nation-state. The Diaspora is excluded in the definitions of nationality and identity, as it is seen on the outside, as an interloper; it is nomadic, not based on the same concepts of association and affinity. These issues have come to the fore in the consideration of the Jewish and African Diasporas particularly. A great deal of interest has been expressed in the identities of those who connect with the Diasporas of the world (see Mirzoeff 2000). These Diasporic identities are usually understood in the tropes of movement and relocation. They can be comprehended through a metaphor of a glass vessel dropped from a great height, the resulting scattered shards though forming strong individualities, creates painful and traumatic legacies. To combat both the exclusory nature of the nation-state and the trauma of the Diaspora, authors have considered these identities to be located in the notion of 'becoming' rather than 'origins.' Both Hall (1991) and Gilroy (1993) have identified the importance of this subtle but dramatic shift in representation. In this reformulation the identities which derive from Diasporas are not made to compete with the model imposed by a Western European enlightenment ideal of unity and totality (Derrida 1992: 79). Instead the notion that identity is provisional and in a state of flux is considered a strength for the individuals and communities who associate themselves with Diasporas. Hall (1990) remarks with reference to a Black British identity that the term 'Black' is utilised as a vehicle to organise Black Britons to reject and subvert the exclusion of a hegemonic white-British national narrative (Gilroy 1987: 15). The exclusion and alienation of the nation-state therefore is ameliorated by the reworking of the phase 'born and raised' to explain and indicate the continual sense of 'becoming' rather than 'originating.' Current research has also emphasised this more fluent nature of identity within society, with Anderson's (1983) term 'imagined communities.' This highlights how identity, whether ethnic, national or regional is a continuous social, cultural and political construct rather than a specifically defined homogenous essentialism.

Museum Poetics

Museums representing the transatlantic slave trade in Britain in 2007, and thereby depicting the African Diaspora, consequently face a pressing concern to acknowledge their role in the construction of identity. This examination requires responsibility and sensitivity, to explore how memory and identity are socially formed discourses and to be aware of the repercussions of exhibitions within the contemporary political and cultural climate. To demonstrate the responses to this obligation a brief explanation of the museums are required. Utilising the term, 'poetics of exhibiting' the manner in which these museums communicate and

enable an identity located in the African Diaspora will be examined (after Karp and Lavine 1991; Lidchi 1997). These 'poetics' can be defined as, 'the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition' (Lidchi 1997: 168). The 'poetics of exhibiting' can also relate to the manner in which the individual visitor to the museum reacts and acts with the spaces and ordering presented to them. In this sense 'poetics' also refers to the 'being-in' the museum, how experiences of the space and place of the museum alter and impact upon the notions of self (after Merleau-Ponty 1962: 12). In this sense the performances of identity can be witnessed as individuals place themselves, their sense of selfhood and identity, in the context of the museum displays (after Goffman 1969: 28).

- The International Slavery Museum, National Museums, Liverpool.

The International Slavery Museum in the Merseyside Maritime Museum, National Museums Liverpool, opened in August 2007 and has attracted plaudits regarding its innovative displays on the history of the Atlantic slave trade. The museum places the perspective of the enslaved African firmly within the minds of its visitors. Displays of traditional masks and audio-banks of music from the African continent are placed prominently near the entrance, whilst one of the first parts of the museum which is seen by visitors is a reconstructed Igbo village. In this reconstruction which contains detailed and well-researched representations of tribal huts and displays of artefacts, the vibrant culture of Igbo culture and by association West Africa is communicated to the museum's audience. This display is placed notably before the sections addressing the advent of the transatlantic slave system, the legacies of slavery and the existence of modern-day slavery.
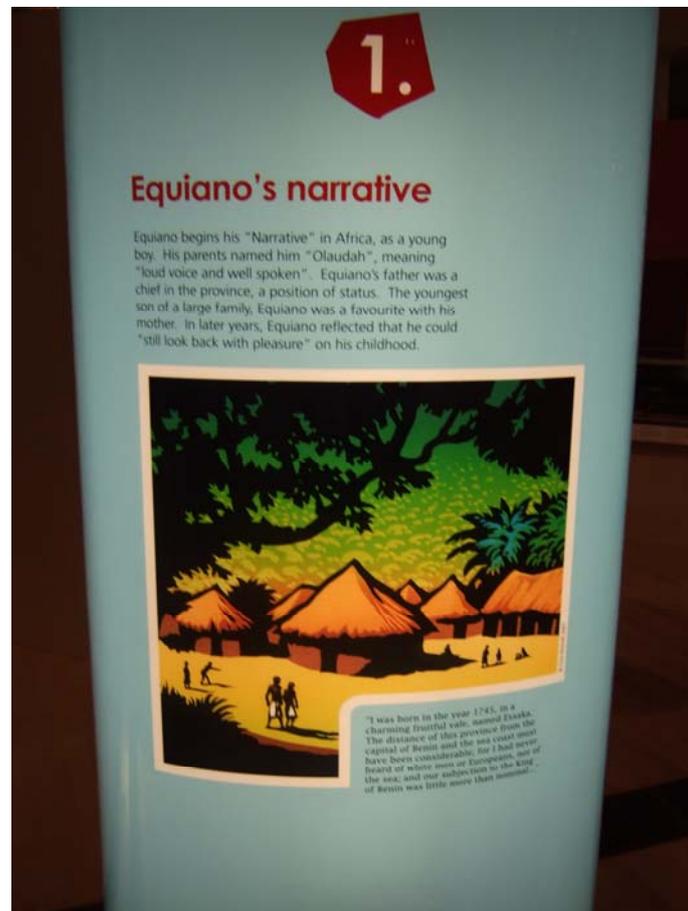

Reconstruction of an Igbo Village -- International Slavery Museum, National Museums Liverpool.

- The Equiano Exhibition, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

The Equiano Exhibition at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery which opened in October 2007 has revealed the once-forgotten history of one man, the abolitionist Olaudah Equiano. Whilst focusing on the travels and work of Equiano the exhibition also locates the origins of the story within Africa. Benin bronzes are displayed as well as other artefacts which emphasise the spiritual, cultural and economic development of West Africa before the advent of slavery. The visitor is placed in this initial section before they learn of the abject horrors of the slave trade and the events in the life of Equiano. It is African origins which are constantly

reinforced in the exhibition as Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, 'The African', is revealed as a distinctly African author, campaigner and traveller. The recent debate concerning Equiano's origins in America rather than Africa is referred to slightly, but on the whole dismissed as Equiano is reinforced as having been born in Africa (see Carretta 2006). The rest of the displays in the museum are thereby understood and examined by audiences in the specific context of this knowledge and appreciation of Olaudah Equiano.

Display panel at the Equiano Exhibition --
© Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery

Performing Identity

Detailed audience surveys were carried out at the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery at their opening weekends in August and October 2007 respectively. Respondents were asked open-ended questions which were designed to elicit answers regarding the processes of identity-work which were induced by the displays and exhibitions. These questions were;

- 'Whose history is represented here?'
- 'Are you part of the history here?'
- 'Is there any aspect of your personal identity to which this exhibition speaks to or links?'

In both museums it was noted that respondents who identified themselves with the African Diaspora, whilst recognising the history represented in the museum as 'African', and themselves

as 'part of this history', frequently asserted that there own personal identities were not reflected in the museum displays. In the International Slavery Museum this disassociation was particularly pronounced with regard to the reconstructed Igbo village.

> LA5: 'There is an Igbo village, but I was born in Freetown and that did not feature much in the exhibition.'
> LA24: (With the Igbo village there is a) . . . predominance of Nigeria . . . I would worry that people from Ghana and Cameroon might feel underrepresented. You couldn't say it's the story of the slaves because it isn't…'

Respondents who associated themselves with an African heritage reacted strongly against the representation of a 'traditional Africa' at the International Slavery Museum.

> LB14: 'I feel the traditional images of masks need to be reduced . . . you can put that, but black people don't do that everyday.'
> LA36: 'I think most of the African-centred displays, still have the air of being fairly exotic and it's a pity about that.'
> LD44: 'No, I'm still looking for my personal identity.'
> LA64: 'Yeah I'm Igbo, so I thought about being Igbo, I thought it's like being famous! But not really, my dad was African and my mum was West Indian it doesn't say anything about that.'

Reactions indicated a desire to place a contemporary context into the displays about an Africa.

> LA24: 'You could have more of that . . . black people today . . .'
> LA36: 'Develop more about African intellectuals today.'
> LD24: 'I think we should be more aware of them not only Olaudah, what's his name (Equiano)? We should have more about the men and women in Britain that's my opinion.
> LA64: 'Africa? I don't think Jamaica is represented enough, there's too much about Africa . . . I think if you came here and didn't know anything about slavery you'd think it was all about Africa.'

Similar desires were also evident in the Equiano Exhibition, where respondents stated that contemporary concerns should be paramount.

> BHA37: 'The newer aspects that were brought in, about the older West Indian people how they think about Equiano.'
> BHA65: 'I just see it in the past I don't think it has any relevance.'
> BHD14: 'I would like to see more about black figures up to date.'
> BHD15: 'You could have had something on modern black role models, you have a bit on Frederick Douglass but I guess Equiano was English though . . . especially for younger people if you had modern people doing positive things. There wasn't many British people now who are shown as major icons.'

The strongest association with personal identity regarding the Equiano Exhibition appeared in the form of Equiano as a figure of the Diaspora. Though the dispute over Equiano's actual origins reduced his stature for some.

> BHA79: 'The early path of his life, the journey from Africa to the
> New World and of course his later life, how things transpired for
> him when he settled back in England. . . Because I could equate it
> with journeys by the *Windrush* crowd, the problems they had. . . I
> could compare both.'
> BHD15: 'It detracts for me, because, it's kind of like for me, its
> 50% likely for me that he made it up.'

What is significant in the responses to the exhibitions is that very few individuals specifically linked it to the African heritage they themselves associate with. For the most part individuals placed the exhibitions' relevance in relation to their own lives, their roles and occupations.

> BHA72: 'Erm . . . . spirituality, I'm a Christian so you see how
> more people are Christians now and you can see how its not just
> now this is happening it was in the past.'
> LB20: 'It's just my life. There's no part of my job as an educator or
> in my daily life when I don't think about the past.'

The performances of identity by respondents were therefore conducted with reference to the present rather than a specific aspect of the past. Despite detailed and sensitive approaches to the subject, respondents felt that the museums did not facilitate this performance. Rather, it was witnessed as a critical reaction to the presentations by the museums in the displays and exhibitions. In this respect individuals can be seen to be engaging in a form of tactics in the portrayal and construction of identity (after de Certeau 1984: 15). Rather than assume the models offered by the museums individual are assuming another means of identity-formation, one that recognises 'origins' but which is far more focused on a state of 'becoming.' The repeated concern for modern or contemporary concerns in museums is a strong indication of the dissatisfaction of representation with an anachronistic image of Africa.

Becoming over Origins

Both museums place a representation of 'Africa' as a primary concern in their displays. It is a notion of an African 'origin' that plays a central part in understanding the entirety of the displays. 'Africa' is represented as an untroubled term which can be referred to throughout the displays; a means of referencing stability and permanence in the face of the upheaval of the history of European enslavement of Africans and the poisonous heritage of racism and prejudice which stems from it. Both museums could therefore be considered to conform to a Western European-inspired model of depicting 'origins' over 'becoming.' This might have the effect of normalising both the African Diaspora and Africa itself, it creates a myth of origin which serves paradoxically to alienate and exclude those who associate their identities with the African Diaspora (after Barthes 1989: 155). As visitors reacted to what they perceived as an uncritical and simplistic 'Africa' as the formative point in the exhibitions the concept of constructing an identity with the Diaspora is placed beyond the grasp of those individuals. Hall (1990: 226) has stated with regard to 'African' origins within a Caribbean identity that the, 'original Africa is no longer there…We must not collude with the West which precisely, normalises and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past . . . it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered.' Gates (1988: 237) has also written of the means by which 'Africa' has been imagined and constructed within the Diaspora to represent and reflect the needs, desires and concerns of contemporary individuals who associate with the Diaspora.

The museums which attempt to 'unearth' a 'lost' African origin prevent an association with the continent because the drive to 'return to the beginning' is in itself an impossible feat. It is a delusion which can never be fulfilled and functions only to dislocate the present further from its own context (after Gilroy 1993: 5). Pure origins are a myth, a concept of fabricated identity which has its own roots with the notion of the nation-state. Hall (1990: 235) instead has drawn attention to the means by which 'Africa' and the Diaspora, its effects and legacies are formulated from a position elsewhere. In effect this argues for imagining new perspectives on which to speak about identity and belonging. It highlights the process of mediation which takes place, as associations with the African Diasporas are constructed *in situ*.

> 'Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think.
> Perhaps instead of thinking as an already accomplished fact . . . we
> should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never
> complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not
> outside, representation' (Hall 1990: 222).

These identities are thereby always cyclical; they invest in an Africa but they are always constructed in the knowledge of existence elsewhere, hence African British, African Caribbean or African American (see Du Bois 1989: 5). Gilroy's (1993: 4) use of the image of the ship bears witness to this mode of thought as it reveals the continuous negotiation of identity between Africa, Europe and the Americas.

Equiano, a Figure of the African Diaspora

It is intriguing to consider the dialectical, 'origins' and 'becoming', in the context of the controversy of the life of the eighteenth-century author, Olaudah Equiano. Since his 'rediscovery' in the 1960s, Equiano has become representative of the African Diaspora for many. Equiano has retained this prominence because of the attachment of the 'origin' myth. He was considered symbolic of the wider African Diasporic community because of his presumed origins in West Africa. However, as recent scholarship by Carretta (2006) has revealed the possible birth of Equiano in South Carolina, rather than Nigeria, as indicated in Equiano's own autobiographical account, the importance of how the Diasporic identity is represented comes to the fore. The focus on 'origins' would serve to lose Equiano as a figure for the Diaspora, but the notion of 'becomings' realises anew an individual for the present (after Hall 1990: 235). Equiano indeed associated himself with the African Diaspora by constructing his own concept of African identity through his narrative. Equiano in his labours, his travels and his writing constructed an identity which drew on Africa but in the context of his own position. His African heritage was essential but it was imagined and told from his perspective as an author, a traveller, a campaigner, a husband and a father rather than based upon an essentialised origin myth.

> 'I hope the reader will not think I have trespassed on his patience
> in introducing myself to him with some account of the manners
> and customs of my country . . . I still look back with pleasure on
> the first scenes of my life, though that pleasure has been for the
> most part mingled with sorrow' (Equiano 1988: 15).

**Display panel at the Equiano Exhibition --
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Conclusions -- Alternative Poetics

The representation of an African Diasporic identity in both the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, and the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, which mark the bicentenary of the 1807 Abolition Act, therefore reiterate the 'origin' myth which acts to prevent access to a sense of 'belonging' and 'becoming.' The definite structure of the museums which enforce a consideration of an 'Africa' before entering any further into the displays 'defer' the audience association with the Diaspora (after Derrida 1996: 70). An alternative model of representation, which has at its central concern in the way in which identities are constructed, would place the importance of African heritage in the frame of present contexts. Africa would thereby be understood as a source of identity by travelling through and circulating between Britain, the Caribbean, America and Africa. Rather than compartmentalised, uncritical depictions of a 'traditional Africa', an African presence is understood with a European and American presence (see Hall 1990: 235). In effect this would argue for non-linear, circular histories, which always return the individual to where they started rather than depositing their notions of self in a mythical origin. Following the notion of a 'poetics of exhibition' this engenders an arrangement of displays which offer a story of becoming, of starting and ending in the being-which-is-in-the-museum, rather than an external, always absent, mythological, past-being (after Heidegger 1962: 125). The representation of African Diasporic identity is therefore depicted as a process rather than as an assumption.

The manner in which museums have dealt with the poisonous heritage of the European enslavement of Africa is of the utmost importance in Britain, as it enables a consideration of history, memory and identity. By placing 'origin' over 'becoming' however as the central concern in displays which reflect the African Diaspora, museums act to disengage audiences who may seek to use these institutions as a cultural resource.

Note

Acknowledgements

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