

Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society
Volume 3, Issue 2, Spring 2011, pp. 154-172

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Spalding, Nikki. "Learning to Remember Slavery. School Field Trips and the Representation of Difficult Histories in English Museums." *Eckert.Jemms* 2011/2.
<http://edumeres.net/urn/urn:nbn:de:0220-2014-00132>.

Post peer preview precopy edit

Final printversion accessible from publisher Berghahn Journals under
bergahn.publisher.ingentaconnect.com/content/berghahn/emms.

edumeres.net

Learning to Remember Slavery: School Field Trips and the Representation of Difficult Histories in English Museums

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Abstract • Drawing on the fields of education, memory and cultural studies, this article argues that, as important cultural memory products, government-sponsored museum education initiatives require the same attention that history textbooks receive. It investigates the performance of recent shifts in historical consciousness in the context of museum field trip sessions developed in England in tandem with the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. Analysis of fieldwork data is presented in order to illustrate some of the complexities inherent in the way difficult histories are represented and taught to young people in the twenty-first century, particularly in relation to citizenship education.

Key words • citizenship, difficult histories, historical consciousness, museum field trip, slavery

Taking as its point of departure *Understanding Slavery*, a national education initiative and web-based resource developed in tandem with preparations for the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the former British Empire, this article discusses how memory works at the interface between two significant institutions of learning: the museum and the school. It argues that, in order to better understand the political and pedagogical nuances of teaching difficult histories, it is essential to engage more deeply with memory and trauma studies literature in order to consolidate the cultural study of these types of educational practice. Drawing on qualitative data, it examines the experiences of school pupils (aged eleven to fourteen) learning about the history of transatlantic slavery in museums in England in the years immediately following the bicentenary. In doing so, this research offers an alternative analysis of the 2007 bicentenary, highlighting how national education initiatives, school programs, education resources and museum field trip sessions influence – and are in-

fluenced by – political debates and changes in the curriculum, and shifts within what is commonly referred to as public history or public memory, but which is discussed here in terms of historical consciousness. In describing the international shift in historical consciousness in the past decades, Katharina Schramm notes that “the rather fragmentary and flickering resurgence of the slavery topos in very heterogeneous settings has given way to a remarkable rise in public references to slavery and the slave trade on an almost global scale.”¹ In the case of Britain, 2007 was both a culmination of and a catalyst for this shift; the role of the bicentenary in contributing to a more reflexive and truthful representation of the history of the British Empire being taught in schools is regarded by many as one of the greatest achievements of the commemorative year.

If, as Aleida Assmann states, “history textbooks are the vehicles of national memory,”² then it follows that government sponsored education initiatives delivered by museums should also receive similar conceptualization. In his work on memory and teaching history, Peter Seixas claims that we need to reconceptualize history education and its role in influencing how we study historical consciousness, commenting further that studies have so far tended to narrowly focus on learning experiences that take place in the school.³ In response, this article seeks to illustrate that an understanding of the (re)negotiation of national memory can be gained from studying history education practice that takes place *outside* the classroom, for example at museum or heritage sites. The first section of this article situates the study within the literature, with particular reference to methods and concepts from education, memory and cultural studies that can be used to investigate the historical consciousness of a museum field trip. The second section deals with the rhetoric of teaching traumatic pasts and outlines how the recent production of educational media and curriculum revisions has changed the practice of teaching about slavery in England. The final section presents selected fieldwork data from Wilberforce House in Hull in order to explore the consumption of the post-2007 historical consciousness of slavery through field trips to museums.

Combining Education, Memory and Cultural Studies Approaches

This article argues that the intersection between the heritage and education sectors provides fertile ground for investigating the performance of collective memories in the public sphere; the “associated activities”⁴ of a museum deserve the same academic attention that the more static exhibition commonly receives. However, making connections between the ephemeral experiences that take place at heritage sites and the construction of national collective memories involves theoretical and methodological challenges that have not yet been fully overcome in the literature. Within memory

studies, exhibitions and their accompanying learning resources are sometimes erroneously treated as passive expressions of the society within which they are located; in heritage and museum studies, although the agency inherent in the production and consumption of an exhibition or other interpretive media is frequently foregrounded, the complex relationships with issues of historiography, politics and memory-work have traditionally been underdeveloped. However, ongoing cross-fertilization between the fields means that there are emerging opportunities to make connections between a macro-analysis of general shifts in national collective memory and a micro-analysis of specific cultural memory products and individual responses from memory “consumers.” As discussed below, in memory studies there are discussions about how to study the processes surrounding the collectivity and negotiation of memory (for example, Sharon Macdonald’s account of “historical consciousness”⁵), whilst within cultural and heritage studies there is a parallel dialogue about how best to study cultural texts, objects or products (for example, Paul Du Gay’s “circuit of culture”⁶).

Historical Consciousness and Education

Macdonald states that when we study historical consciousness, we are “trying to grasp the various ways in which people may relate to the past” by paying attention to their awareness of and experiences relating to the past and their ideas about history.⁷ In order to understand how people relate to the past, it is essential to critically address the very notion of collective remembering; “Can societies really remember collectively? [...] Can individuals really remember what they have not directly witnessed or experienced?”⁸ A successful transmission of memory – of knowledge and understanding of past experiences – must be achieved by educating the younger generations about their society’s history. The title of this article, “learning to remember slavery,” alludes to this conflation of education and intergenerational memory in the rhetoric of teaching traumatic pasts; *learning to remember* becomes learning *in order to* remember – learning about the past in order that *society* will continue to remember. In the realm of learning to remember, the necessity of “rites of participation” and “emotional acts of identification”⁹ brings together the processes of performance and empathy, which the author discusses in detail in a forthcoming book chapter¹⁰ in relation to Alison Landsberg’s work on “prosthetic memory.”¹¹ Landsberg’s ideas about how – through the consumption of mass culture – individuals acquire prosthetic memories of events from the past that they did not experience themselves is invaluable for investigating the experiences of school pupils learning about traumatic pasts through heritage and museums. The value of adopting Landsberg’s conceptualization

is further enhanced by its adaption into du Gay's circuit of culture, which provides a way of thinking and talking about cultural consumption in relation to the other processes that are central to the negotiation of historical consciousness.

Adopting the Circuit of Culture

The circuit of culture is an influential model for the study of cultural objects. It provides a valuable framework for critically analyzing and articulating the processes of *representation*, *identity* and *regulation* that, together with the processes of *production* and *consumption*, are conceptualized as interacting to form a "circuit of culture – through which any analysis of a cultural text or artifact must pass if it is to be adequately studied."¹²

Figure 1. "Circuit of Culture," adopted from Du Gay.¹³

Although this model was designed in order to analyze cultural texts or objects at a micro level, it seems to be equally applicable to the study of the processes of historical consciousness within which an object is situated. Furthermore, if societies can in fact remember collectively, it is reasonable to conclude that a significant amount of this shared remembering must take place through interactions with – and experiences of – cultural memory products. For example, in the museum field trip, the objective of learning to remember a particular aspect of the past is achieved when pupils engage with cultural memory products – such as texts, archive material, objects, film, performances and memorials.

We can see the various elements of the circuit of culture model reflected in the academic literature produced in response to 2007. For example, Geoff Cubitt's examination of the themes of resistance in museum displays (*representation*);¹⁴ Laurajane Smith's analysis of the "emotional avoidance and disengagement with exhibition content" in the responses of white British visitors to slavery museums (*consumption* and *identity*);¹⁵ Kalliopi Fouseki's exploration of "the tensions that arose between museum professionals and community members" during consultation (*production*)¹⁶ and Emma Waterton's insightful considerations of issues relating to commemoration, multiculturalism and social exclusion (*regulation*).¹⁷ Waterton has also examined processes of *regulation* and *representation* through a study of "official government responses [and how they] were replicated in popular culture, drawing on the film *Amazing Grace*."¹⁸ Continuing in this line of enquiry, she has (along with Ross Wilson) used critical discourse analysis to explicate the rhetoric of the bicentenary, arguing that there is a dominant "way of talking about the transatlantic slave trade [that they] have labeled 'abolition discourse'."¹⁹

However, what has been missing so far is fieldwork-based research that tackles how the history of slavery is being taught to school pupils in England in the aftermath of 2007. Some work has been done in other countries, for example Kate Hodgson addresses the situation in France since the passing of a law in 2001 that "states that slavery and the slave trade should be given a prominent place in the national curriculum;" she looks at the provision of educational materials, at how "new research on slavery and the slave trade is impacting on French curriculum development," as well as carrying out interviews with educators about how their practice has changed.²⁰ Similarly, Filipa Ribeiro da Silva examines the national curriculum and secondary level textbooks within the Portuguese context, concluding "that slavery and abolition is taught mainly based on historical facts and with little or no reflection upon the 'wrongs' of slavery and the 'responsibility' of the historical actors involved."²¹ Although these types of studies are clearly important for critically articulating how nations represent their own difficult histories within their curricula and textbooks, they are limited by their lack of ethnographic, observational data relating to what is happening inside the classroom. Without in-depth fieldwork with school groups we cannot claim to know what is actually being taught and how pupils are responding to and engaging with the history of slavery.

Remembering and Teaching Traumatic Pasts

Controversies over the form and content of school textbooks are not new. Over the years, right-wing groups in the United States have launched

numerous campaigns against textbooks deemed ideologically offensive or antipatriotic. [By] focusing on what is included and excluded in school textbooks, these controversies serve as proxies for wider questions of power relations in society.²²

In his article, “The Politics of Palestinian Textbooks,” Fouad Moughrabi offers an examination of the dynamics and dimensions of struggles to shape knowledge and national identities via the content and rhetoric of educational resources, perceptively situating the Palestinian case within a broader context of international textbook controversies. The idea that history textbooks may be deemed offensive or unpatriotic due to their representation of events, historical causality and national responsibility is central to many of the issues underpinning the teaching of traumatic pasts in schools. What if the values of a nation are counter to a defining aspect of its heritage? What happens when a nationally important narrative will not easily accommodate unproblematic stories of heroism that invoke patriotic feelings? Holocaust studies has been influential in defining debates about the political, social and intellectual significance of learning to remember traumatic pasts; memory studies literature is infused with reflections on the experience of (remembering) the Holocaust. A diversity of subjects are covered in Holocaust memory literature, including Norman Finkelstein’s examination of the “exploitation of Jewish suffering;”²³ Michael Rothberg’s work on realism and the representation of trauma;²⁴ Roger Simon’s research on the ethics of learning and remembrance,²⁵ and James Young’s analysis of the meaning of Holocaust memorials.²⁶ In terms of Holocaust education, there are books addressing *Why Should We Teach about the Holocaust?*²⁷ explorations of “teacher and learner perspectives,”²⁸ considerations of the “principles and practice” of teaching the Holocaust,²⁹ and even chronicles of students touring sites of Holocaust memory.³⁰

The research that has emerged from Holocaust studies has undoubtedly influenced the rhetoric and focus of subsequent interest in trauma and memory studies. Appreciating why memory of the Holocaust has become a “paradigm for trauma”³¹ is an essential starting point for understanding how and why memories of African slavery in the Americas have been represented, produced, imagined, performed and consumed in recent decades. Didier Fassin states that there are two main reasons for this widespread conflation of the Holocaust with trauma:

[It] represents the most extreme reach of violence, and as such has become an unavoidable reference point for any experience of pain, of suffering, and hence of trauma [and] it developed after a period of silence, a fact that attests precisely to its traumatic nature. It is because of the delay between the event and its painful exposure to the public gaze that the process can be qualified as trauma.³²

Comparisons with the unveiling of the history of transatlantic slavery, mainly since the 1980s, have been highlighted and expounded by Paulla Ebron; the “parallels between African Americans' discussions of historical recovery and memory and Jewish histories of the horrors of life during the Holocaust are striking especially in terms of their categories and narrative conventions.”³³ Regarding the cultural-historical symbolism of the Middle Passage, Ebron states that the “horrors of the Atlantic slave trade have led some African Americans to claim this as our holocaust.”³⁴ She goes on to cite the Middle Passage as creating “the point of origin for African American history as a collective project of memory, trauma, and healing. It serves as a reminder of the physical and psychic separation from ‘home’.”³⁵ Lurking behind the trauma of the Middle Passage is the unavoidable evidence of Britain’s involvement in the slave trade; “between 1700 and 1810, the British transported almost three million Africans across the Atlantic.”³⁶ Historian James Walvin vividly describes the role of the British in the trade:

Africans formed an army of uprooted and transported people, cast to the far side of the Atlantic, in unspeakable conditions, for the economic betterment of their captors and tormentors. In all this, the British were central. They had not been the first, and they were not alone. But the British had brought the Atlantic system to a degree of economic perfection which profited themselves and their colonies in proportion to the plundering of Africa and the violation of their African captives.³⁷

It is not surprising, therefore, that there has been a sense of anxiety and uncertainty about how to represent this previously hidden history within the British public sphere. 25 March 2007 marked 200 years since a parliamentary bill was passed to abolish the slave trade in the former British Empire. In late 2005 and early 2006, the Heritage Lottery Fund announced awards of over £16 million for projects relating to the bicentenary, encouraging “community-based organizations, and heritage institutions working in partnership with them” to apply for funding “to support projects inspired by the Parliamentary abolition of the slave trade in 1807.”³⁸ Critics of the 2007 bicentenary have drawn attention to the fact that by using the 200th anniversary of Britain’s role in *abolishing* the slave trade as the narrative through which this history is revealed to the public, it only serves to whitewash the truth of the horror, scale, scope and legacy of the British slave trade. The pan-African human rights organization *Ligali* stated that the “2007 slavery whitewash must not be taught in schools.”³⁹ As mentioned in the introduction, Waterton argues that in 2007 the “rhetorical resources drawn upon [...] to understand and soothe the traumatic history of the exploitation of African people” led to a regulation of the official narratives, popular media and public discussions about the slave trade:

To pre-empt and combat these issues, the ‘abolition discourse’ was drawn upon by all levels of British society, legitimized by government institutions and perpetuated by further elements in society, newspapers and computer-mediated communication.⁴⁰

Waterton also draws attention to the government’s decision to officially commemorate the date that legally ended the slave trade, claiming that this lens of abolitionism was used to “[distance] Britain from questions of guilt and complicity, focusing instead upon shaping the slave trade as part of an isolated past.”⁴¹ However, as this article illustrates, the narratives, motifs and rhetoric that characterize how this contentious history is taught through museum field trip sessions do not always neatly fit within a framing of transatlantic slavery that neutralizes issues of guilt and severs ties with contemporary legacies of inequality and racism.

The official government tag-line for 2007 was, “Reflecting on the past, looking to the future.”⁴² This focus on the future is a familiar trope in the rhetoric of traumatic pasts. The *Directgov* website claims that, “Improving our understanding of the slave trade” is necessary in order to tackle the legacy of this “difficult and sensitive subject,” going on to explain that “children aged 11-14 will learn about Britain’s role in the slave trade and its abolition, as a compulsory part of history lessons in schools.”⁴³ Although transatlantic slavery has been taught by some schools in Britain since at least the 1980s, it was not until 2008 that the slave trade joined the British Empire, the two world wars and the Holocaust in becoming a compulsory part of the secondary history curriculum. The website also states that “it is recognized that teachers need help to teach it effectively,” and that therefore the *Understanding Slavery* initiative has “developed a range of high quality materials to help teachers bring the subject to life for pupils.”⁴⁴ Since 2003, *Understanding Slavery* has been encouraging teachers and young people to examine this history through museum collections and heritage. The initiative was funded by the Department for Culture Media and Sport and the Department for Children Schools and Families and it developed as a partnership between museums in London, Liverpool, Bristol and Hull. *Understanding Slavery* also produced handling sessions, loan boxes, lesson plans, print and digital resources, on-site group sessions for schools and best practice teaching guidelines, such as a booklet titled *Unlocking Perceptions*.⁴⁵ Those involved in producing the museum learning resources and teacher training opportunities that both predated and accompanied 2007 were also instrumental in lobbying the government and curriculum authorities to make slavery a compulsory topic.⁴⁶ Clearly greater consideration needs to be given to the agency of those involved in the production of educational media within the heritage sector, including their influence on the content and focus of the national curriculum. In the Key Stage 3 history curriculum guidelines, under the heading of “British history,” it states that:

There should be a focus on the British Empire and its effect both on Britain and on the regions it colonized, as well as its legacy in the contemporary world (e.g. in Africa, the Middle East and India). Recognition should also be given to the cultures, beliefs and achievements of some of the societies prior to European colonization, such as the West African kingdoms. The study of the slave trade should include resistance, the abolition of slavery and the work of people such as Olaudah Equiano and William Wilberforce.⁴⁷

Through the data analysis that follows, this article argues that, although the content of the curriculum can certainly be regarded as operating within the framework of the abolition discourse (as evident above in the explicit inclusion of Equiano and Wilberforce), the ways in which narratives of the slave trade, slavery and abolition are performed through museum field trips offers compelling evidence of the complexities of how memories are produced and consumed at the interface between heritage and education.

A Day at the Museum. Fieldwork and Analysis

The fieldwork on which this article draws primarily involved observations of school field trips to museums in England (taking place between January 2009 and June 2010) that deal explicitly with slavery, alongside pre-visit and post-visit surveys with teachers and pupils (where possible), interviews with museum professionals and a comparative case study in Ontario, Canada. For the purposes of this article, data relating to just one of the case studies is presented – a school group visit to Wilberforce House Museum in Hull that took place in February 2009. The structure and purpose of this particular field trip was devised collaboratively between the education staff at the museum and the head of the school's history department, Gareth,⁴⁸ who hand-picked the combination of sessions that the pupils experienced, as well as personally facilitating an introductory and plenary session that served to frame the beginning and the end of the trip. In his pre-visit survey, Gareth stated that, during the visit, he would like his pupils to learn about “West African culture before slavery to show the abuse they experienced” and the “power / breadth of the Abolition movement.” As the trip took place half-way through the academic year, not all of the approximately 120 pupils that attended had yet covered slavery in their history lessons. Of those that had, Gareth explained that they had been learning about the “Middle Passage, life on plantations, Abolition and the transatlantic slave trade.” In regards to how the museum visit fits in with the teaching unit back at school, Gareth commented that it “complements and adds to the learning” for the slavery and abolition units, that it “adds in citizenship [and] mass campaigns” and also

illustrates the “significance of slavery and linking to today.” To a question about why he thinks it is important that his pupils learn about the history of the slave trade and slavery, he responded “to learn about the poor treatment of humanity and racism and how it has a clear legacy today.” Finally, when asked whether he had ever encountered any difficulties or issues in teaching this history to school pupils, he said that he had, citing “their own prejudices / racial views and passivity and lack of care” as a troubling issue.

As the following vignettes illustrate, within this particular museum field trip, transatlantic slavery is regarded as being “unique” (due in part to its pervasive legacy), yet is simultaneously treated as just a[nother] history topic through which the “universal” themes and skills of the citizenship curriculum can be taught with the aim of developing what has been termed “active global citizens.”⁴⁹ This paradoxical dichotomy between the unique and universal qualities of difficult histories is addressed by Michael Rothberg’s multidirectional memory, “a model based on recognition of the productive interplay of disparate acts of remembrance and developed in contrast to an understanding of memory as involved in a competition over scarce public resources.”⁵⁰ The issue of whether or not difficult histories are regarded as being unique atrocities is central to why and how societies choose to remember and represent aspects of their past in the public sphere. It has been asked whether Rothberg’s model allows us to move “beyond notions of the Holocaust’s uniqueness that might inscribe a hierarchy of suffering.”⁵¹ The capture and enslavement of millions of human beings is unarguably a unique and difficult aspect of British history that often elicits cautious responses from those with the power to regulate the public sphere and contribute to a shift in historical consciousness. Despite the difficulty of remembering potentially divisive pasts, national historical narratives can and do change and this (re)negotiation is commonly tied up with iterant changes in formal education, and is often (but not always) characterized by a shift “from monumental to self-critical narratives.”⁵²

Representing Slavery as Simultaneously Unique and Universal

The day begins with an assembly-like presentation in one of many grand, wood-paneled rooms in the Guildhall. Whilst the pupils get settled on the floor, Gareth shows a looped slideshow of images depicting scenes from the Middle Passage, plantation life, and the abolition movement whilst playing a recording of the famous hymn, “Amazing Grace.” Once everyone is seated, he talks a little about why they are visiting the museum and how it links to what they have been (or will be) learning about at school. He then shows a brief but violent clip from the 1997 film, *Amistad*. He ends this introductory session by posing the group a key question

for them to consider during their visit: “Why is it important to study the transatlantic slave trade today?”

The school group is made up of male and female pupils aged twelve to thirteen, almost all of which self-identified as white British in the pre-visit survey. They are quickly divided into six groups of around twenty. Each group is accompanied by two teachers and is escorted from session to session, taking part in six different activities in total across the course of the day. The researcher joins one of the groups as they rotate round the different stations within the buildings utilized by the museum for school visits, including the Guildhall, Wilberforce House itself, the adjacent Streetlife Museum and the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation. The sessions are scheduled to last between forty-five and sixty minutes. In the morning, the pupils attend a session that utilizes mobile devices (“Personal Digital Assistants”) to facilitate a “trail around the galleries” (the only time they spend in the galleries during the visit), which is followed by an object-handling session that covers the Middle Passage and life on plantations. Before breaking for lunch, the group moves to the museum’s dedicated learning centre to take part in their third session, which is titled “Campaigning for Change.”

The pupils are divided into sub-groups and instructed to cluster around three tables. The museum facilitator, Jeremy, kicks off the session by talking to the pupils about something they can easily relate to – the popularity in recent years of the colored rubber wristbands used to promote campaigns and charities, for example “Make Poverty History.” Jeremy, who is in fact a freelance education specialist with a background in media and advertising, shows a powerpoint presentation that begins with an image of the McDonald’s logo – “The Golden Arches.” Images of well-known logos scroll across the screen: Google, Nike and Microsoft. Jeremy explains that it is through repeated exposure to a logo that familiarity is developed, with the goal of enabling everyone to instantly recognize the image, illustrating how campaigners come up with a logo and a strap-line that “will make you make connections to many emotions.” The group is then shown this striking image from an advertising campaign adopted by the Italian clothing brand Benetton:

Figure 2. “White, Black and Yellow,” United Colors of Benetton⁵³

The image depicts three bloody hearts, positioned closely next to each other against a white background, accompanied by the United Colors of Benetton slogan. Written across the three hearts are the words “WHITE,” “BLACK” and “YELLOW.” This example of Benetton’s controversial campaign images has been imaginatively chosen because, as Jeremy explains, it was intended

to show that “everyone’s the same on the inside,” regardless of the color of their skin (in fact, this particular image was developed by Benetton in conjunction with World Anti-Racism Day in 1996⁵⁴). After this energetic and engaging introduction to the practice of developing effective campaign strategies, the pupils are given the opportunity to think about something they would like to campaign to change in their own lives; the issues they choose include domestic violence and bullying. They then work in small groups to develop a key message, a logo and a slogan for their campaigns, the outcome of which is that each pupil makes their own pin-badge with their group’s design on the front.

This session is successful in demonstrating to a school group – in a very short amount of time – the possibilities of mobilizing people through effective campaigning, using the example of the abolitionist movement as a starting point, and abolitionist hero William Wilberforce as inspiration. The facilitator was able to reinforce the importance of civil responsibility, and in doing so he empowered the pupils by giving them a glimpse of their potential agency as citizens in British society. Most of the pupils were visibly enthused by the task, displaying pride in the logos and slogans that they had produced; they were eager to show them off to Jeremy and the teachers that were present. Nevertheless, other than a reference to the abolition movement at the beginning of the session, the historical specificity of the abolition of the slave trade in the former British Empire is all but missing; the focus quickly turns to modern campaigning strategies and how organizations use them to fight for people’s civil rights, for fairer trade, and for an end to modern forms of slavery. It seems, therefore, that when the past is mobilized by government agendas such as the fostering of community cohesion and the promotion of universal values through citizenship education, there is a danger that the outcome is a historically diluted representation, one that focuses entirely on what is most attractive about a history (the abolitionist movement) and in doing so avoids the more difficult narratives (the impact and legacies of empire). The abolition movement is decontextualized and homogenized and the matter of British involvement in the slave trade is completely glossed over.

After the lunch break, the group is directed towards one end of a canteen space in the Streetlife Museum. During this afternoon session (which is followed by one final session titled “Unfinished Business,” which uses object-handling to discuss abolition), an interesting discussion about the impact of the slave trade on the African continent takes place between the museum facilitator (Lucy), the more vocal pupils in the group and one of the accompanying teachers. The session is titled “Africa before the slave trade:”

[Lucy] What kind of things do you think people think about when they think about Africa?

The pupils offer the following responses: that Africans are “stupid,” “savage,” “not modern,” that the people there have “no rights” and that they are “not really in touch with the modern world” – Lucy writes these onto a flipchart sheet.

[Teacher] Can I add one Miss? ‘Inferior’ – white Europeans believed that Africans were an inferior race.

[Lucy] What do you think they thought Africa was like?

The pupils’ ideas included that people thought there was “nothing there,” that everyone “lived in huts,” and that there were “no crops,” “no businesses.” They also talked about the landscape, hunting and how “women did domestic things.”

[Lucy] So we’re building a picture of what Europeans thought of Africans – that they were inferior and not as good as us.

[Teacher] Can I ask something Miss? What about religion? What about the idea of the British bringing Christianity to Africa? What did you see in the gallery?

[Male pupil] That the African religion was pagan and inferior.

As the session develops, the focus turns to how to make good use of historical “facts” and how to separate them from “fictions:”

[Lucy] I’m going to give each group a pack of evidence and I want you to think about whether your evidence does or does not support this view of Africa that was widely accepted. I want you to think about culture, religion, technology, education, society and government, art and creativity [Lucy writes these categories onto the flipchart]. You have twenty-five minutes to do this, so take your time. Really examine the evidence and think about what it is telling you. [...] I was asked this morning by another group why the timeline says ‘black death in Britain’ on it – this is so you can see what other things were happening at the time.

The evidence packs contain laminated documents, photos of objects and supporting information. Through conversations with the pupils, Lucy and the teachers work hard to challenge the pupils and encourage them to really think through the prejudices that they have about Africa. One teacher talks to the pupils about the evidence they have in front of them of the fact that Africans could read and write, whilst Lucy tells the pupils that Ancient Egyptians were in fact African, even though, quote “we don’t always make that link.” She shows the group a traditional African mask – the only object used in the session. Returning to the flipchart, Lucy reads

out the ideas about Africa that the group came up with at the beginning of the session:

- [Lucy] Do we still think these things are true?
 [Pupil] No.
 [Lucy] So, what evidence can we use to demonstrate this?

The pupils are very keen to demonstrate that the things they had said about Africa at the beginning of the session were not in fact true, using examples from their evidence packs and from their discussions with the teachers and the facilitator. The contradictions regarding uniqueness in the rhetoric and narratives used to teach school pupils about the transatlantic slave trade seem to be partly determined by the intended message of the educational media or the desired pupil response to a particular session. In some cases, for example in this session, transatlantic slavery is presented to pupils as being unique, as having played an exceptional role in world history; this is usually achieved through discussions of the legacy of the slave trade in Europe, the Americas and Africa. Now that some of the commonly held prejudices against Africa and Africans have been dismantled through the discussions around the evidence packs, Lucy turns the pupils' attentions to the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on the continent:

- [Lucy] Has it changed your opinions at all? Because I must admit that I didn't know a lot of this before. Has anyone learnt anything?
 [Pupil] I didn't know that they [Africans] were rich.
 [Lucy] Yes and that's because much of what we have learnt about today was destroyed by the slave trade – we gave them guns, fuelled civil wars to create prisoners of war that could be sold into slavery, people fled their towns, societies were destroyed. Skills were lost and tribalism became strong as people wanted to protect their own – we have a lot to answer for.

In this session the important but complex matter of the legacy of slave trade in Africa and the question of “inherited guilt” is presented to the school group, framed within a dichotomous “us” and “them” rhetoric. The main learning objective of the session is to give pupils an opportunity to voice their own assumptions and prejudices about Africa; they were then presented with the knowledge and evidence to challenge and subvert these assumptions. Furthermore, the pupils were able to gain a better understanding of the role of the slave trade in contributing to political, cultural, social and economic circumstances in certain African countries. The group was also introduced to the idea that some of the prejudices against Africans were created by Europeans in order to jus-

tify the continuation of the slave trade. Here, the pupils are encouraged to regard the history of slavery as an unavoidable part of “our past,” as something that we need to take responsibility for, as something that has serious resonance today. This session is notably different to the session on campaigning, where the traumatic and emotionally charged history of the transatlantic slave trade is treated as a conventional history topic from which universal lessons of civic responsibility can be drawn. Returning now to the abolition discourse, it is clear that, in this particular visit, the pupils were presented with both of the “two specific ways of characterizing ‘the slave trade’ and its abolition” that Waterton stresses: “the explicit use of factual detail” and “the studied use of vagueness,” which results in “accentuating positive aspects of British history and nullifying any seemingly ‘disruptive’ influences through ambiguity and sidelining.”⁵⁵

The contrast between these two sessions brings to light the processes of selecting from the past that which is useful – and forgetting that which is not – in order to create something that addresses what Edward Said refers to as “urgent purposes in the present.”⁵⁶ However, despite the various criticisms made of the bicentenary, for many of those in the heritage and education sectors that were involved in the hive of activity surrounding the commemorations, there was a sense that 2007 did in fact usher in a “sea change of thought.”⁵⁷ In England school pupils currently learn about a part of history that has previously been either hidden, distorted or misrepresented in both the pages of the history textbook and the built environment. However, it will be interesting to see how this will be affected by the curriculum changes that proposed by the current Secretary of State for Education, the Conservative MP Michael Gove, who has said that he wants to see a return to “a traditional education, with children sitting in rows, learning the kings and queens of England.”⁵⁸ *The Times* newspaper interviewed Gove in March 2010:

History should be taught ‘in order — it’s a narrative,’ Mr. Gove said. Lessons should celebrate rather than denigrate Britain’s role through the ages, including the Empire. ‘Guilt about Britain’s past is misplaced.’⁵⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, by reconceptualizing the significance of the museum field trip, it becomes clear that museums in England have played an important role in influencing the public representation of an aspect of the history of empire that in recent years has been perceived as posing a potential threat to the status quo of national identity. Through their involvement in national education initiatives such as *Understanding Slavery*, and the production and consumption of educational media and field trip sessions

for school pupils, museum education professionals have helped to shape collective memory through their efforts to engage the next generation with the history of slavery. By examining the regulation of official narratives and messages within both the revised national curriculum and the associated museum learning experiences, this research finds that although formal education and field trips are undoubtedly framed within the abolition discourse, the ways in which the rhetoric of learning to remember slavery is performed within the museum environment is both complex and multifaceted. For these reasons, this article contends that the circuit of culture provides a language and structure to carry out simultaneous macro- and micro-analyses of the iterative processes by which the education and heritage sectors interact in order to shift the historical consciousness of a society over a period of time. This approach is particularly valuable for studying periods of heightened commemorative activity, such as the 2007 bicentenary, due the fact that this type of intense memory-work inevitably results in an increase in the production and consumption of relevant cultural memory products, a more official regulation of representations and a higher sensitivity to questions of identity.

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