

What is Challenging History? Jenny Kidd opening presentation at Challenging History Conference, City University London, February 2012

## **What is Challenging History?**

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In conversation with heritage professionals over the past three years, we have come to an understanding that challenging history is not just about the 'doing' of a difficult or sensitive subject. It is a complex of historical, philosophical, ethical, social, institutional, personal, and recently even economical, dilemmas.

### 1. Challenging Subject matter

the nature of certain heritages are widely considered to be 'challenging' in their often contested subject matters, the agendas they reveal, the political debates they feed into and stem from, the emotions that they engage, and the lack of any sense of 'resolution' to be found in their exploration. They ask uncomfortable questions about our humanity and inhumanity, raise issues around legacy, apology, ownership, voice, repatriation, classification, memorialisation, memory and forgetting (see Cameron, 2003 for more on 'controversial subjects').

In the literature the themes are 'challenging', 'difficult', 'emotive', 'sensitive', 'contested', 'controversial', 'hot', 'edgy', 'disturbing' and even 'unsavoury'. They are 'histories', 'issues', 'heritages' and 'legacies'

But challenging history is of course about more than just subject matter...

### 2. Challenging approaches

Approaches to work that falls within the remit of 'difficult and sensitive' have the potential to do things differently: to challenge the conventional narrative of 'history' itself. It involves interpretation from different perspectives, revealing hidden, sidelined and forgotten artefacts of culture, and even of our social life and behaviours, exposing the process of history 'making' itself as inherently biased and at its worst, bigoted. Heritage is thus increasingly recognised as in itself a contested site, subjective and subjectifying, incoherent, multiple and of course 'difficult'.

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There have been subtle changes in our understanding of heritage 'construction' more broadly, recognising and placing increased emphasis on personal accounts, witnesses and individual experiences rather than any grand narrative. It is recognised that the museum literally, spatially, and institutionally *bears witness* to a potentially infinite complex of visitor narratives and interpretations.

One approach we see more and more is seeking to share the burden of responsibility with the audiences themselves, that is, to engage them in processes of collaboration, participation and co-production, in the very patterns and practices of their representation. This is a common response to the 'problem' of representation. But of course consultation and collaboration can of course be challenging in and of themselves. Which brings us to...

### 3. Challenging Visitors

Fiona Cameron's research has shown that many museum visitors are open to reflection on challenging topics, and feel it is a museum's duty to engage with them (Cameron, 2003; 2006). However, we have seen in our work with heritage professionals a perception of most visitors as fairly traditional in their outlook and unadventurous in their consumption of 'other' heritages. As a consequence, work with difficult heritages is often confined to non-traditional audiences.

However, such audiences often emerge as rather *too* challenging in their heterogeneity, and in their 'closeness' to the heritage. Debate about ownership and appropriation emerges as a central problematic; who has the 'right' to 'deal *with*' a subject matter, and who might museum staff need to go to in order to legitimise the work or 'ask *permission*' to do it?

In this sense, it seems true that, as Ruth Abram (one of the founders of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience) has noted, 'There is, in the museum profession, a certain fear of the public.' (Abram in Sandell, 2002: 133). That fear is rooted in questions about authority, legitimacy and perhaps even guilt, which are amplified through a perception of isolation from the 'core' practice and function of the institution.

### 4. Challenging institutional contexts

Perceptions of 'museum culture' more broadly emerge as the biggest problematic for the museum professionals we have spoken to; such a

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culture leads to institutional inertia and feelings of disempowerment, and as a result education staff are often reluctant to change their practice or challenge the norms of their institutions.

We have seen frustration at the simplifying and authenticating practices of museums. Dealing appropriately and sensitively with challenging heritages often seems unmanageable and the institutional hurdles insurmountable. Finding consensus (assuming there can be any) whilst simultaneously pleasing stakeholders (including community groups) may be a challenge too far. Sustainability can be particularly frustrating, especially when the visibility and perceived relevance of a topic can fluctuate in line with the wider political and social agenda.

Making space for silence, and time to transition between the relative safety of a challenging programme or exhibition and the 'real' world, emerged as hugely important, but how the various layers of a site, its spaces and its overarching narrative allow for that remains problematic.

#### 5. Challenging definitions of 'learning'

Heritage institutions are tasked with helping in the achievement of a number of educative endeavours: to aid in the understanding and construction of identity; to transform our relationships with our landscape, communities and 'nation'; and, with any luck, to make us good citizens.

But, in projects that seek to engage with difficult and sensitive heritages, what does a successful learning programme achieve? What are the ethics of 'teaching'? For some, tangible learning outcomes are a must (that is, ones measured by the museum and not by the visitor). For others, it is enough for visitors to be given the opportunity to think and feel; just to 'be' within the space and place of the institution. Thinking about what can realistically be achieved in learning programmes emerges as crucial, and to articulate the particular understanding of learning that might be appropriate for a project.

The link between education and emotion is one that we keep coming back to, revealing an insecurity about how and whether empathy and emotion should be framed as learning outcomes.

So this brings us to the last and most pertinent dilemma for those in this room...

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## 6. The challenge of being simultaneously a heritage professional and a human

The heritage professionals we have spoken to feel limited and inhibited in their engagement with challenging histories for a number of reasons; practical reasons such as a lack of specific skills and training and a scarcity of time in their day to day work to think about ethical issues; a lack of communication across the sector and with academia on these themes making them feel isolated; and a hesitancy to be seen to claim ownership or authority over heritages that might be deemed inappropriate.

Working in project delivery, they are tasked with being educators, sometime counsellors, facilitators, communicators, mediators and of course, all the while, gatekeepers to the material heritage as curated by the museum. This raises questions about what the jurisdiction of education staff should be, and the responsibility of other museum staff to commit to the challenge of the heritage also.

There are tensions around the simultaneity of their individual identity (with all of the accompanying complexities, attachments and entry narratives) and their professional and institutional identity (with its own sets of agendas, sense of mission, policy and practice). This can at times reveal synergy, but can also result in moments of dissonance, discomfort, even embarrassment.

Such numerous and far-reaching personal, professional and institutional concerns can lead to hesitation, stagnation and a closing down of dialogues in the practice of the museum. Approaching such topics can be rendered just too daunting as the 'doing' of a heritage pales into insignificance against the bewildering and towering 'how' of the endeavour. There is an underpinning anxiety constantly weighing up the ethics of doing *something* against the ethics of doing *nothing*.

*'It feels like we just stopped because it was too hard' –*

Yes this work is hard, and it should be, but at the moment it seems it is hard for the wrong reasons. Not least because of a lack of opportunity for sharing experience and dialogue in open, supportive environments about the challenges of this work. We hope to create such a space over

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the next three days.