

Kidd, J, 'The Museum as Narrative Witness' presentation to the Narrative Space conference, Leicester University, 20-22 April, 2010

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Across the cultural sector, there has been a wholesale re-appraisal of the role and status of 'users', and an increase in practices deemed participatory. This is the case for museums also, where the rhetoric of co-production and consultation is now common. This paper examines ways in which this rhetoric is being actualised in the practice of heritage performance – increasingly participatory, and requiring of 'audiences' a willingness to give of themselves to the narrative in ways previously unimagined.

Recent research at the University of Manchester has examined the number of ways in which people respond to the performance of heritage, often termed live interpretation or museum theatre [CLICK]. With a focus on 'learning', The Performance, Learning and Heritage project team have spoken with more than 450 audience members about their experiences, including exploring the ways in which participatory moments make the heritages in question more vivid, relevant and memorable. This paper aims to explore some of the implications of visitors contributing their individual memories (in ways that are spoken or unspoken, even unspeakable) to the larger narratives that institutions construct through performance. Theories of personal memory will inform the analysis of a number of responses articulated in the research. We will see that there are issues around the authority, veridicality and authenticity of the larger museum project which are opened to scrutiny within and through such practices.

In 2007, museums and heritage sites around Britain encouraged members of the public to take part in any number of performances, debates, and enquiries into the history of slavery and the slave trade, in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in the UK. The discourse spoke of uncovering hidden histories and taking part in 'conversations' about the legacy of slavery. Such events encouraged a mass of articulations by members of the public of their stories, genealogy, heritage and experiences of this continued legacy (including of racism); different forms of individual, yet very public, remembering. One such example, and the focus of this paper, was the performance of *This Accursed Thing* that was commissioned at MM.

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Susan Bluck acknowledges that although there has been an explosion of literature on memory practices exploring how much and how well people remember, what are missing are more pertinent questions about the 'why and how' of people's remembrances of life events (both mundane and significant). 'What functions does it serve' she asks 'for people to remember, reflect on, and share with others, the experiences of their lives?' (Bluck, 2003:113). This question is one I take as a challenge in exploring responses to *This Accursed Thing*, and for reflecting on the role of individual memory practices within the museum.

Practices of heritage and history have been re-conceptualised in recent years to more usefully and adequately account for our roles as publics within their constructionⁱ. Likewise, understandings of 'performance' have also become more nuanced, not least in articulating how everyday activity (such as visiting a museum) can itself be analysed as performative.ⁱⁱ There is not space to carry out an in-depth appraisal of these changes hereⁱⁱⁱ, only to account for the growth of performance within museum spaces as one direct result; a means of widening representation (to reflect multiple voices, viewpoints, and, not least, the 'ordinary' person's role in history-making), filling gaps within collections, and (even) problematising museum practice. Instead, this paper seeks to understand participatory performance as a practice of memory; its construction, actualisation, and (on occasion) its articulation.

Unsurprisingly, memory has also been recognised as a complex and fluid concept and discipline with, not least, an ambiguous role in processes of historicising the past^{iv}. The relationship between individual and collective, social, or cultural understandings of memory (related to groups, communities or institutions) has been an ongoing source of debate.

Here, a focus on personal, autobiographical and postmemory (or sociobiography) is used to frame the discussion of a number of audience responses to *This Accursed Thing*, recognising that although there will be common elements to respondents experiences and understandings of slavery, the trade, and its legacy, there were differing (infinite) patterns of personal memory evoked through the performance.

Practices of personal and autobiographical memory have been well theorised (Larsen, 1991, Ross, 1991, Conway, 1990, Conway et al, 1991, Beike et al. 2004). Conway's oft-cited and influential 1990 conceptualisation of autobiographical practices foregrounds a number of

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characteristics including; personal interpretation, (and thus variable veridicality), long memory duration, and imagery. Such memories are often tied to other memories, intensely and repetitively recalled, and often represent unresolved conflicts or even trauma (Singer and Blagor, 2004).

Autobiographical memories, although inextricably connected to processes of 'self-hood' and actualisation^v, also have a number of social functions, namely, developing intimacy, teaching and informing others, and, crucially for this study, eliciting and showing empathy (Alea and Bluck, 2003:167). In moments of articulating memory we render those memories narrative and this in itself inevitably impacts upon the memory's solidity and coherence^{vi}. This process of emplotment or even 'retro-fitting' can render such memories open to accusations of nostalgia at best, and fictionalising at worst. I have argued elsewhere that this process is akin to performance in and of itself (Kidd, 2009), but this paper questions how (and whether) this differs when more readily accepted and encouraged as part of performance activity, in the retrieval and articulation of such memories in social spaces – namely, the museum.

Postmemory is a term used by Marianne Hirsch to give name to the experience of those who carry memory even after primary witnesses to events are gone. They are, according to Gibbons, 'secondary memories'; 'the inheritance of past events or experiences that are still being worked through' (Gibbons, 2007P:73). In this way, the event continues to be experienced and made 'real' for future generations. As a result, it may be that new understandings or forms of expression can be arrived at in time, but it is never inevitable. Zerubavel uses the term sociobiography to refer to instances where individuals' remembrances and identity construction are indelibly and intrinsically tied to the histories of a wider group or community, and this we see in evidence in (many, but by no means all) responses to *This Accursed Thing*^{vii}.

In the exploration of *This Accursed Thing* that follows, we will see how personal memory practices are prompted in and through one participatory performance. *This Accursed Thing* makes for a powerful infusion of pasts both generationally distant and as they are sensually and emotionally experienced in the everyday present.

***This Accursed Thing* {SLIDE}**

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The play consisted of two actors, each playing three characters. After a brief induction to the performance (outlining that there would be a promenade element and that participation was encouraged), the audience met, in order: a curator, Thomas Clarkson (an abolitionist), an African slave trader, a European slave trader, James Watkins (a freed slave who came to the UK to campaign for abolition) and a millworker from Manchester. The performance ended with a de-brief session, where issues arising from the narrative could be debated, or (as was often the case) individuals would volunteer their own responses, including stories of their ancestry and the legacy of slavery. The audience finds themselves in turn 'transported' to 1807 and official abolition, to Africa where they encounter trading as it continued, and to Manchester in the 1860s as the American Civil War led to a mass shortage of cotton for mills in the UK.

There are thus a number of complex issues and instances of potential friction between characters themselves, but also between the audience and the different characters. The most significant prompted instance of participation was one that followed the enactment of a slave trade, where the European slave trader turned to the audience, and, in a moment of direct address, challenged them to tell him what is wrong with what he does. Another brief, yet powerful, moment occurred when James Watkins, who was born on a plantation and thus named after that plantation, spoke of the pride he felt in the name he had chosen in later freedom. He encouraged audience members to reflect on the meaning of this simple empowerment, to 'taste your name', and then to shout it at the tops of their voices in the (usually silent) Natural History Gallery of the museum.

There were a number of instances within the performance then that actively encouraged audience members to construct arguments, reflect, and (verbally or otherwise) engage. It encouraged personal recollection, and exploration of 'self'ness even as a complex and collective narrative was being enacted. There are of course issues here related to how the private is rendered public, and what responsibility the actors and the museum have to the products of such participation (narrative or emotional) that need further consideration.

Personal memory work in *This Accursed Thing*

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The following examples are taken from discussions with audience members, many of whom volunteered information about how participation had called to mind personal memories and experiences^{viii}.

Many forms of memory practice (especially personal memory) can result in intensely emotional responses, and *This Accursed Thing* attests to this. Sensual-emotional recollections were common [SLIDE], and tended to increase participants empathy with the characters that they met. According to O'Keeffe, these kinds of memories are more individual than collective, involving fantastic amounts of emotional effort in retrieval (O'Keeffe, 2007:5). Emotions mentioned by our respondents included anger (frequently), fear, shock, shame, sadness, and pain. As one respondent eloquently asserts on the slide there

I think that was my personal, individual avoidance. Avoidance because of the pain; avoidance because of... It actually took me on the journey that I didn't want to connect with, because it was a connection of thinking, this is what my ancestors went through. It was obviously a holocaust that I feel and believe should never be forgotten... at some point, it got more emphasised and it got more... It was harder not to get involved on the journey. So, basically, yeah: I went with it because trying to avoid it – it wasn't happening any more for me. You could not help but be there with them. [MM_I_PP2_79]

The experience of these feelings was (mostly) a positive one in the frame of the performance, and reflecting on them was not a difficult experience for participants.

In many ways, a part of this emotional engagement was taking ownership of the themes being explored [SLIDE], relating them to their own ancestry, circumstances or grievances. This is 'our' history, 'my' heritage:

And I think I was very upset, but it's mostly a matter of mixed feelings, because the African chiefs, or elders or whoever they were, also somehow enticed the visitors to take the slaves. Then they, in exchange, gave them the goods that they brought. So, through greed and deception, they were able to... Our kings! And look at them: they were able to get what they wanted, our kings and chiefs selling their people to them. [MM_O_PP2_212]

There was no respect for us [MM_I_PP2_208]

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Similarly, for those who were unable to marry the narrative being portrayed to their own ancestry, there was a sense of taking ownership of the heritage in new and quite profound ways [SLIDE]. In ways that had perhaps not been expected, the history and legacy of slavery became a part of their stories also:

There was definitely a lot of hurt ... I'm from England; I'm proud of England and England's my country, and seeing it in that light. It disgusts me in a way. To see that so many years... Well, not so many years ago, that that's the way that English people were. To quite happily discuss people's lives and just sell them for treats, effectively. I just couldn't believe... It just makes me feel like I don't belong here. That's not something that I believe in and therefore it's not something that I wish to be involved in. [MM_I_PP1_70]

This taking ownership of 'ignorance' was a common thread for a number of respondents. Additionally, in the quote above, we see that the performance has impacted upon the respondent's understanding of the passage of time since slavery was abolished. This is not only a heritage of which he finds he is part, but it is one that can no longer be distanced and understood purely as a 'past'. The passage of time can here be recognised as subjective; the history becoming closer to his own understanding of 'self' in any number of ways.

There were very real (and not untroubling) moments in the performance where people began to lose themselves to the narrative being portrayed, its urgency for some individuals manifesting itself in an almost total immersion in 'their' story. Such intensity can of course be an aid to understanding and meaning making, and the emotional response often useful (as we have seen), but it is of course difficult for actors and museum staff (and researchers also) to anticipate and measure any ongoing sense of unease that might be fostered.

There are more explicit examples of people using the performance as a means of self-actualisation and narration (including life story construction): [SLIDE]

This was so personal to me, this one. Whereas I'd say always before that I'm looking at the children and seeing it through their eyes. I found this very personal to me and I don't know... I think it's the whole sort of humanitarian aspect of it: what went on and how black people have been treated in the past and how our relationships are nowadays. It was much, much more personal to me, this particular subject, at this stage of my life, I suppose. [MM_I_PP2_77]

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In this conversation, which took place in the weeks following the performance, the respondent professed to be engaged in a process of self-actualisation that directly related to the issues highlighted in the performance. This she was only able to conceive of as an activity in the present, which included thinking about the legacy of slavery, something which, again and again, our respondents felt an urgent need to talk about (and often felt the performance could have done more to address). [SLIDE] This continued unpacking of how individual story and remembering tied into more collective feelings that the legacy of slavery needs acknowledging and exposing, brings us to thinking about sociobiography. There is something of a memory burden that many of our respondents demonstrate when it comes to thinking about the legacy of (actual and metaphorical) slavery:

This is a matter of mistrust, you know? ... But the white man, on the whole, did enslave the black man badly. And they're still doing it! [MM_O_PP2_212]

It lives today; the legacy still lives on, doesn't it? I don't understand that.

[MM_F_PP1_205]

I think slavery is like having an elephant in the room, you know, everybody has seen it but no one wants to talk about it. [MM_I_PP3_191]

That we might all have 'seen' slavery puts it very firmly in the present. Consequently, we all have a responsibility to remember (collectively and individually).

For some respondents [SLIDE], it was not solely about the legacy but about making very clear and 'real' connections to ancestors and the journeys they made, and continuing to work through the issues that arise from the very fact of the journey in the first instance (as in postmemory):

My father's Jamaican, so I'm bound to have a more of an interest than folk, do you understand me? I mean: It's relative to me, do you know what I mean? My ancestors were taken from Africa to Jamaica [MM_I_PP2_78]

it is really an exploration of my foreparents, it is not just a general look at history but is looking at something that relates to me. [MM_I_PP3_192]

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Often this connection was enabled or amplified through the use of artefacts in the play [SLIDE]. These artefacts linked to peoples personal stories in quite profound ways, having 'born witness' to the heritage, but also now to the memories of our respondents:

It's not just an artefact, it tells a history of whoever made it and whoever owned it and whoever took it from the rightful owner. So it's quite complicated, quite complex and I just think this story should be told, and I think that was a very good element of the play, when we were made aware of these connections. [MM_I_PP2_209]

You actually got something that has, from that historical period that has that resonance in a way and it kinds of *speaks a story* more than what you see if you were just sitting there, if you know what I mean. [MM_I_PP3_186]

One encounter which was cited repeatedly in interviews was holding the manila ring (presented in the performance by Thomas Clarkson). These brass rings were used as a trading currency for slaves, and many audience members reflected on feeling the 'weight' of the ring (in any number of ways). Literally holding a man's life in your hands, this cold, ugly metal had a particularly powerful and longlasting impact: [SLIDE]

We thought it was going to go round the neck, and that was the worth of a whole human being, you know? It was just so horrific. There were one or two moments, like that, where I wanted to weep at the fact that human beings could do that.

[MM_F_PP1_205]

O'Keeffe has written about the role of artefacts as witnesses to history, giving the example of briefcases from the World Trade Centre. Their materiality, as in the response above, manifests and attests to the horrors of the heritage, silently and with a terrible augustness, 'speaking the story'.

The architecture of the museum also plays a part in contextualising the performance, and the various rememberings that it elicits. It is both a comforting reminder of the fixity of history and heritage (as we have come to understand it), and a guilty party in the narrative being portrayed. There is a peculiar aptness to its frame. In the best and worst senses, it appears, 'you are surrounded by history in a museum' [respondent]. Being immersed in such a space, for all of these reasons, enables the memory practices that we have seen above to take place:[SLIDE]

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One of the most memorable parts is when we were in the big hall; it was rather a bit like being on board the ship if you like [MM_I_PP3_195]

It's like you're walking on to a set [MM_F_PP1_205]

Such comments on the museum as a 'set' for the piece indicate a simultaneous sense of 'place' and a desire for 'dis-placement' from the reality of the museum (its familiarity and sets of expectations) or perhaps the intensity of the subject matter; a temporary removal from a world where the legacy of slavery and racism is so apparent (as our respondents tell us). There is a mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar in the use of the space, the heritage on offer and the particular sites within which they are performed. It is important to our respondents that the museum is not a 'stage' (in a traditional, static sense), however, the use of words such as 'theatrical' and 'dramatic' are common in describing the space. It is naturalistic, but on occasion 'fantastical'; only temporarily theatricalised (although perhaps always performative).

Of course, the notion of a 'set' also implies a suspension of disbelief, a way of making sense of the actors and characters within their museum experience. This is something which heritage performance does extraordinarily well (as noted in the research). As opposed to 'traditional' museum interpretation, which was articulated as being very much about material culture behind glass, performance was seen as bringing a museum and its collections to 'life' [SLIDE], of ascribing them (once again) a use-value:

Although we knew it was the same two men, when they acted out those characters, you really believed that you were talking to that person. [MM_I_PP2_80]

It was very stirring; very moving. Yes, I remember feeling that I wished that my students had been there as well. I remember thinking that this was a really good way of bringing history alive. [MM_I_PP2_71]

because in a sense you can't ignore it because it is in front of you, you can't turn the page as it were or turn away. You are forced to confront it. [MM-I_PP3_193]

One recurring issue in projects related to difficult and sensitive heritages is the question of sustainability. Having stirred emotion and memory, and having conceptualised the issues as intensely problematic even in the present day, what responsibility does the institution have to continue the debate? To provide a shoulder for ongoing emotional outpourings? To act as a

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repository for associations and memories? Or even to find ways of transforming such legacies in the 'real' world?

These are questions which hung in the air at the end of many of the conversations which took place in and around *This Accursed Thing*: [SLIDE]

I don't know if you are going to put it in your report, or make it known, but I am telling you this: it's not going to have any impact... I have to ask you: what is the purpose of you even interviewing me, you know? (LAUGHS) Honestly, they are saying that African people – black people – don't come to museums. When you tell them why they don't come, they don't put anything in their place. I am a loner in the museum world. I was in London yesterday, when I was in the Victoria and Albert Museum, I looked around and I said, you know: it's true, we don't go to museums. We don't go to museums and I know why! When we go there, we don't see nothing of ourselves. When we go there and we see anything of ourselves, it's a European interpretation.

[MM_I_PP2_85]

In museums generally, there is a recognised problem of representational adequacy (Bennett, 1995: 9). The museum itself bears witness to centuries of racism and is integral to how, what, and why, we remember.

And people are perhaps right to be wary. The 2007 commemoration activities, diverse and productive as they might have been, seem all too distant in 2010. How genuinely then is the museum actually making space for such narratives?

The museum as narrative witness

In moments of participation, whether through performance, comments on visitors feedback cards, guided tours or (supposedly interactive) devices, the museum becomes a potential and actual witness to the articulation (and perhaps consolidation) of memory. Kacandes recognises the role of the witness in the process of articulating autobiographical memories, and potentially even making them useful; 'Narrative witnessing' by a listener/audience is crucial in rendering the memory authentic (Kacandes, 1999: 55).

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As public disclosure of our memories becomes an increasing practice, there are many potential witnesses to our processes of self-hood, problem-solving, and re-organisation of life experiences (chaotic, traumatic or other). No longer is the role of the witness the preserve of the family, friend or therapist. There is no doubting that this range of witnesses impacts upon the memories individuals choose to reveal, the ways they present them, and the significance that is ascribed to them beyond the self. Yet to reveal within museum environments in ways that are prompted, but unexpected and unscripted, represents a challenge for institutions in terms of the responsibility that bearing witness brings. Gaynor Kavanagh conceptualises one form of engagement with the museum as the 'dream space'; one situated in our inner life and subrational consciousness, and over which the museum can have little control (Kavanagh, 2000:2). It is in this dream space that the most enjoyable, yet subversive, parts of the visit lie, and in which, I argue, the above examples of engagement are situated. We must be careful not to view such engagements as inevitable and desirable in and of themselves, but to think carefully about how we can frame them so the museum as witness is an enabling rather than legitimising influence or (at worst) an appropriator.

In the final analysis it is of course the relationship between individual memory and social memory which needs more focus here. There are complex ways in which some of our research participants rejected the idea of a collective memory of slavery as simplistic and homogenising; as itself a fiction. However, a narrative that recognises and encourages individual remembering and is able to shift in response to it was more appealing. In this sense, the narrative acknowledges and works *with* its fictionality. Thus, we see that (well-conceived and well-executed) performance can be responsive to individual narratives in the moment of their provocation. Participatory performance can do this in ways that 'traditional' interpretation techniques rarely can. It is how we enable and encourage these individual meanings and memories to stand alone without feeling the need to reshape them into collective or communal narratives that represents the ongoing challenge to institutions used to ascribing legitimacy.

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ⁱ See Bradburne, 2000; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Bendix, 1999; Vergo, 1989.

ⁱⁱ See for a start Schechner, 2002; Bagnall, 2003; Pearson and Thomas, 1994; Smith, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Jackson and Kidd, 2010 for more on these themes.

^{iv} See Cubitt, 2007; Schacter, 1996; Gibbon, 2007; Moore and Whelan, 2007

^v See McAdams, 1993, Crossley, 2003, Finnegan, 1997, McLeod, 1997, White & Epston, 1990

^{vi} It is 'emplotted' in the utterance (Zerubavel, 2003)

^{vii} 'Such *sociobiographical memory* also accounts for the sense of pride, pain, or shame we sometimes experience with regard to events that had happened to groups and communities to which we belong long before we joined them...Consider also the long tradition of pain and suffering carried by many present-day American descendants of nineteenth-century African slaves...Indeed, familiarizing new members with its past is an important part of a community's effort to incorporate them. (Zerubavel, 1996:290).

^{viii} Not least for some of the (unusually high) number of visitors from BAME groups, many of whom are quoted over the following pages).