

## Legacies of prejudice: racism, co-production and radical trust in the museum

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Museums have been complicit in the construction of physical and cultural hierarchies that underpinned racist thought from the Enlightenment until well into the twentieth century, in marked contrast to the inclusionary role that many now seek to fulfil. In *Revealing Histories: Myths about Race* (2007–2009) at the Manchester Museum, UK, a team from within and beyond the museum tried to address this uncomfortable history. They faced challenges and raised many questions: how to present such material honestly but sensitively? Could other voices be included without jeopardising the credibility of the museum? How can post-colonial arguments be made with a collection based on the spoils of empire? And, finally, how are museums to escape the legacies of prejudice? Although well intentioned, the actions of museum staff in realising the project – the authors included – exhibited unanticipated vestiges of institutional racism. Drawing on race and international development studies, this paper concludes that a more radical trust may be called for if UK museums are genuinely to collaborate with other groups on projects like this; to become spaces for democratic exchange, and to face up to their legacies of prejudice.

**Keywords:** co-production; democratic exchange; social responsibility; Manchester Museum; participation; racism; radical trust; slavery

### Introduction

Uncomfortable issues have been the subject of museum displays in recent years. High-profile exhibitions and entire institutions have explored prejudice, colonialism and even genocide. These have generated a growing body of literature on exhibitions tackling difficult subject matter (Bonnell and Simon 2007; Logan and Reeves 2008; Macdonald 2008; Mazda 2004; Sandell 2006; Teslow 2007). Such writing draws attention to the value of analysing process, as well as product, in these contexts. These processes invariably involve not only museum staff but also others outside the museum, for rarely is it appropriate for professionals to tackle such issues without considerable engagement with the communities affected by the iniquities in question. There are now some eloquent reflections on the mechanics of collaboration, especially with indigenous communities in the Anglophone former settler societies (Kahn 2000; Krmpotich and Anderson 2005; Peers and Brown 2003).

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But these encounters still resonate with the museum's role in essentialising difference. Western institutions continue to maintain borders and to privilege particular ways of knowing. Consciously or not, those who staff museums and galleries have been trained and socialised to think and know in those ways, and museums are not set apart from global economic injustice and the reality of racial conflict and prejudice. In Britain, this reality has its roots in empire. There is nothing 'post' about colonialism as a view of the world that persists. Encounters between museum professionals and external individuals, particularly those from Diaspora communities, still bear traces of *coloniser* meeting *colonised*. Fanon (1952) warned that we should not disregard the long-term pathologising effects of colonialism on the coloniser, and yet the museum adopts a benevolent position, while the community member becomes the beneficiary. Have we yet escaped this colonialist way of thinking and operating? Can we discern traces of institutionalised racism in even the most well meaning of organisations?

'Invited spaces' in museums are forever permeated with the power effects of difference (Fraser 1987, 1992). Indeed, Hickey and Mohan (2004) point out that 'discourses of participation' offer a limited number of subject positions for participants that delineate the available level of inclusion and agency, sometimes in very subtle ways. Welcomed to the invited space, participants are subtly encouraged to assume the position of 'beneficiaries' or 'clients', which influences what people are perceived to be able to contribute, or entitled to know and decide. Some speakers are well equipped to make themselves heard in particular social spaces; others are labelled by the way they speak or the words they use. 'Couple this with entrenched prejudices that colour the way words might be heard', as social anthropologist Andrea Cornwall observes, 'and questions of voice become all the more complex' (Cornwall 2004, 84). For some participants can make use of these constructions, positioning themselves in such a way as to imbue their interventions with moral authority, turning the tables and contesting the frame. They transform tokenism into opportunities for leverage. These power relations were clearly evident in the post-project analysis of an exhibition displayed in the Manchester Museum from August 2007 until May 2009, *Revealing Histories: Myths about Race*.

By reflecting here on the process and product of this exhibition – in which we ourselves were involved – we seek traces of institutional racism in even the best intentioned of projects. We ask, does the emphasis on hierarchical knowledge and expertise – including academic research and professional exhibition design – obscure unintended prejudice? For discrimination can be subtle and deep. As Stuart Hall reminds us, racial conflict is a pervasive reality born out of global economic injustice. It is 'a discursive system, which has "real" social, economic and political conditions of existence and "real" material and symbolic effects':

How could race or class exist merely as ideas, when people everywhere are fragmented and bound in their daily lives by their immediate experiences of class and racial structures of dominance? If these were only ideas, then simply by changing your mind, you could change your reality. But the institutions that create and regulate the cultures in which we live are also determined by the social and political relations operating throughout society. (Hall 2002, 453)

Hall argues that racism is not a set of false ideas 'which swim around in the head. They're not a set of mistaken perceptions. They have their basis in real material conditions of existence. They arise because of the concrete problems of different classes and groups in the society' (Davis 2004, 101). Race is the prism through which

British capitalism has reproduced its striated social class formations, so that museums and other academic institutions are in danger of perpetuating hierarchical class relations. One might argue that their exclusionary practices stem not from prejudice, but rather a reluctance to relinquish institutional authority. Others would suggest that the two are inextricably bound. 'It is power', observes Anthias, 'that renders the symbols of inferiorisation effective' (Anthias 1992, 1999, 5). Against this complex framework, it is not surprising that so-called 'innocent' practices in institutions such as museums (here we focus on conflict avoidance in particular) can have unanticipated and, of course, unintended racist consequences. As the Manchester Museum was challenged in a public debate on racism that we explore below, is it 'off the hook' because the behaviour was 'unintended'?

Addressing the UK public sector more generally, the 1999 Macpherson report defined institutional (and unwitting) racism:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. . . . Unwitting racism can arise because of lack of understanding, ignorance or mistaken beliefs. It can arise from well intentioned but patronising words or actions. It can arise from unfamiliarity with the behaviour or cultural traditions of people or families from minority ethnic communities. It can arise from racist stereotyping of black people as potential criminals or troublemakers. Often this arises out of uncritical self-understanding born out of an inflexible . . . ethos of the 'traditional' way of doing things. (Macpherson 1999, 6.34, 6.17)

Still in 2007, the Labour Government's then culture minister, David Lammy, found the UK's museums and libraries to be 'pale, male and stale', with more than 'a whiff of institutional racism' (Woolf 2007). Richard Sandell identifies such prejudice between the lines in the 'talk' itself, embedded in the discourse between museum and participant. He stresses the need for an 'integration of macro (structural) and micro (everyday) levels of discourse analysis in order to better explain and understand processes and manifestations of prejudice', warning against 'everyday racism' (Essed 1991; Sandell 2006, 41). Racism can be manifested not only in that which is spoken, but also in that which is left unsaid, including how words are expressed and, ultimately, in how agreements are arrived at and decisions made.

As expectations of participatory and deliberative democracy increase globally, people from all backgrounds are increasingly accepting invitations to collaborate with institutions like museums, fully expecting to move from being 'users and choosers to makers and shapers' (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). If their anticipation is to be realised, museums must develop a new form of trust. This *radical trust* is based on the idea that shared authority is more effective at creating and guiding culture than institutional control (Lynch 2009). Radical trust as a concept and a practice is widely used online in user-generated content, especially by libraries and in Web 2.0 initiatives, and has been successfully applied to museum blogging (Spadaccini and Chan 2007). We suggest that it should also be used in offline museum practice by adapting collaborative engagement to render information available – recognised and respected from multiple and sometimes even conflicting sources. In practising radical trust, the museum may control neither the product nor the process. The former – if there is one – will be genuinely co-produced, representing the shared authority of a new story that

may then have a knock-on effect in the rest of the museum. But the process itself is the key issue, and it may not be outcome oriented at all. Consensus is not the aim; rather, projects may generate ‘discensus’ – multiple and contested perspectives that invite participants and visitors into further dialogue.

Drawing inspiration from development studies, we argue that participants, including museum staff, may develop new and radicalising skills as ‘citizens’ during this process. Museums may yet become ‘participatory sphere institutions’, that is, ‘spaces for creating citizenship, where through learning to participate citizens cut their teeth and acquire skills that can be transferred to other spheres – whether those of formal politics or neighbourhood action’ (Cornwall and Coelho 2007, 8; cf. Clifford 1997). Contact zones, instead of being regarded by museums as *their space* into which citizens and their representatives are invited, are rather places not only for collaboration but also for contestation. Different participants bring diverse interpretations and agendas that are not homogenised into a seamless product, but rather remain distinct.

It would be customary in the museological literature to exemplify this approach with a successful (and sometimes self-congratulatory) case study. Here, however, we find it more useful to reflect candidly upon a project that illuminates the challenges of this approach. We use the experiences of making one modest exhibition in the UK to reflect upon the role of museums in perpetuating the bigotry of their times, past and present, and the nature of their relationships with their local communities. We draw attention to three aspects of this project in particular. First, it engaged not only with an uncomfortable truth – racism – but with also museums’ own complicity in this injustice (cf. Scott 2007; Teslow 2007). Second, the process was intended to involve not consultation but rather full collaboration with individuals and groups outside the museum. In spite of decades of opening museum doors, this level of involvement is still unusual and, we will argue, not necessarily achievable within the current *modus operandi* of UK museums. The ‘paradigmatic shift’ to collaborative exhibits suggested by Phillips (2003) may not yet have taken effect in Britain. Finally, although the project in question may have been effective in engaging visitors, here we reflect upon the problematic aspects of the process. In the (distasteful) medical maxim, ‘the operation was a success but the patient died’ – here the product survived despite a defective process.

The theatre for this particular operation was the Manchester Museum, which houses natural history, archaeology and anthropology collections in the University of Manchester. Like many other museums and galleries in the region, the museum marked the bicentenary of the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act with a range of activities. Among them was an exhibition, *Revealing Histories: Myths about Race* (commonly referred to as simply *Myths about Race*) which explored the role of museums and other media in perpetuating the scientific racism and racist stereotyping that had once underpinned slavery. Although the topic and its reception were in no way as controversial as an infamous exhibition like *Into the Heart of Africa* at the Royal Ontario Museum, 1989–1990 (Butler 1999; Cannizzo 1991), subtle conflicts in the process of a small project can be just as revealing as the uproar surrounding a major museum product. This paper will examine the participatory processes behind *Myths about Race*, which aimed to co-produce a multi-vocal exhibition focussing on the museum’s own history in relation to scientific racism, followed by a public programme and debate, ‘Are Museums Racist?’

There are always tensions and contradictions within collaborative processes. But after *Myths about Race* exhibition opened, unanswered questions rendered those tensions especially urgent. In the museum's commitment to creating invited spaces, had its staff set boundaries and guided outcomes? Was the museum promoting dialogue that faced these tensions in the process, or were museum staff members avoiding conflict? When there is a high-visibility 'product' at stake – an exhibition or a piece of published research – does the museum's cultural authority prevail, overpowering participant input even while making claims for 'co-production'? In so doing, does the museum continue to be influenced by a history of institutional racism?

One external participant in the project (who subsequently withdrew) referred to the museum's apparent lack of comprehension of the immediacy of these issues as 'legacies of prejudice'. Although it was rejected as a title of the exhibition itself, we use it here instead.<sup>1</sup>

### **Contexts**

*Myths about Race* emerged at the confluence of two initiatives, one within the Manchester Museum and one beyond. In 2007, many museums and other cultural institutions in the UK scrambled to commemorate the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act (Rees Leahy 2006). Many were taken by surprise by the government's last-minute support for the commemoration, which primarily took the form of monies made available to museums via the Heritage Lottery Fund, which stipulated that commemorative programmes and events were to be produced in collaboration with diverse communities (mainly African and African-Caribbean). Despite the lengthy and well-publicised lead-in to the bicentenary in other media, beyond the 'slave-port' cities (Liverpool, Hull, London and Bristol), many UK museums had not made plans for any significant or visible acknowledgement of the event, and so 'parachuted' the commemoration into their existing programming schedule.<sup>2</sup> As an anonymous staff member of one national museum put it to one of us, 'institutions were very late in committing to doing anything [about the bicentenary]. Institutions, where there's an element of risk, won't commit'. Even more critically, due to heightened expectations of collaboration in developing programmes on this subject matter, it brought museums face-to-face with the challenges of participation, co-production and the everyday politics and realities of racism, conflict and community activism. This became more challenging for museums when they convened temporary advisory panels, which used the opportunity to comment on issues wider than the bicentenary. Such issues included workforce diversity and related museum policies and procedures, and although they were seen by many participants as related to the legacy of the slave trade, few museums had the staff training or processes in place to address them.

It was widely acknowledged that the bicentenary challenged museums' edifices of knowledge and power – visible, hidden and invisible (Gaventa 2006). An African-Caribbean participant invited to consult on Hackney Museum's plans to commemorate the bicentenary angrily commented, 'either it's all to do with me or it's nothing to do with me!' – neatly summarising the confusion and frustration that many participants reported from their engagement with museums in 2007.<sup>3</sup> Such 'empowerment-lite' (Cornwall 2008) was cause for resentment when it became 'participation-lite' on an issue – the history of the slave trade and its ramifications in

contemporary racism – that runs deep into the heart of those communities with which museums wished to establish long-term partnerships. This neatly demonstrated how participation within a museum system that continues to disadvantage participants may give them some tools but, as Audre Lorde argued, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (1984, 110).

In Manchester, plans for activities relating to the bicentenary were channelled into a multi-site programme, ‘Revealing Histories’ (Poulter 2007). For unlike the obvious connections between slavery and port cities such as nearby Liverpool, the economic connections between Manchester and enslavement, while no less powerful, were more subtle. In 2006, eight museums and galleries across Greater Manchester collaborated to raise funds and commission research into the economic impact of slavery on the history of the city and the collections in their care. Those involved especially wanted to explore the connections between local communities, the history of the collecting and the development of Manchester as an industrial city. The collective engaged a number of students to undertake research that was to underpin a range of projects to mark the bicentenary the following year. The project distributed the limited funds raised and co-ordinated programmes and displays across the institutions. In the Manchester Museum, staff arranged a series of interventions in the galleries that formed a ‘trail’ leading to a temporary display, *Revealing Histories: Remembering Slavery*, which included a number of items with connections, direct or otherwise, to the Transatlantic slave trade and to enslaved people. But there was sufficient financing and enthusiasm to mark the bicentenary with a more potent change to the museum.

*Myths about Race* was initiated under the ‘Revealing Histories’ umbrella, in conjunction with parallel research already underway into the history of the museum and, in particular, into classification of humans therein (Alberti 2006, 2009). The Manchester Museum’s collections are based on those of a Victorian voluntary society and expanded significantly in the high-colonial period after the Owens College (the University of Manchester’s predecessor) took over its management. The presence and absence of objects in the collection are vestiges of the Enlightenment and of empire. As in other museums of its vintage, artefacts and human remains were arranged in strict racial hierarchies. At the turn of the century, ‘the Human Race [was] represented by a series of skulls of various nationalities’ arranged ‘to illustrate different phases in the development of the human race’, a common method of displaying physical and cultural anthropology at this time (Hoyle 1892, 24, 1895, 8; cf. Bean 1908; Bennett 2004; Bloom 1999; Cleland 1909; Coombes 1994; Gould 1996; Scott 2007; Shelton 2000; Smithers 2008; Teslow 2007). British archaeology and extra-European anthropology were directly juxtaposed, comparing historic European cultures with contemporary ‘savage’ peoples. Together they comprised an evolutionary journey from Australasia (that ‘palaeontological penal colony’) via the Americas to Asia, the Middle East and finally to Europe (Africa’s place in the scheme was ambiguous). As in Liverpool and at the British Museum (Natural History) in London, ethnology was arranged according to skin colour – black (Negroid), yellow/red (Mongolian) or white (Caucasian) (Anon. 1905; Lydekker 1909). The very concept of race had been established in, and with, Enlightenment collections, and such racial hierarchies were consolidated with museum objects of colonial provenance at the height of empire, especially through craniometry. Evolutionism may have injected some dynamism into the classification of peoples, but they were nonetheless hierarchical.

The Manchester Museum and many of its peers retained this arrangement until well after the Second World War (Tattersall 1915; Willett and Bridge 1958). As the century wore on, rather than perpetuate scientific racism, museum staff campaigned against it (Seyd 1973; for a general context, see McAlister 1996; Teslow 2007; Wittlin 1970). In the late twentieth century, the museum gradually shifted, along with the bulk of the UK heritage sector, to act in part as an agent of social inclusion, working not only with colleagues elsewhere in the university but also with a variety of other local people. But they inherited their predecessor's collections and, in galleries that had not changed for years, their exhibitions too. It was these vestiges that staff decided to include in a project for the 1807 bicentenary that would not only explore slavery and its legacies, but also the role of museums in the scientific ideas that had once justified enslavement.

This was not, however, a subject that museum staff felt was suitable to tackle on their own, and external participation was high on the agenda in Manchester as elsewhere. The Manchester Museum has for some time operated within a philosophy of reciprocity, opening up the museum's interpretative processes in collaboration with people from Manchester's many Diaspora communities. In early 2001, the museum established a Community Advisory Panel (CAP) based on the feedback and interest expressed by individual community members within a local audience research project, 'Asking Communities', conducted by the museum in collaboration with the University of Manchester's Centre for Museology in 2000.

The CAP has been in place ever since. Its mission is to be 'a visible, two-way forum that works in partnership with the Manchester Museum to debate, identify and articulate the needs and interests of diverse communities in order to create a culturally inclusive representation in the museum' (Manchester Museum Community Advisory Panel 2008, 2). The CAP has been involved in the organisation and presentation of museum events, evaluating temporary exhibitions and advising on a number of the museum's policies. In 2003, the museum commissioned a film maker to develop a video project involving members of the CAP and a partner organisation, Southern Voices, which was entitled 'Re-kindling Voices'. Individuals were asked to choose three objects of their own choice from within the display cases in the museum's new *Living Cultures* gallery. These objects were then taken from the cases by museum conservation staff. The film maker recorded, without intervention, the encounters between the individuals and their selected objects, as conversations directly with the objects, not interpretations in the usual sense of museum-attributed meanings. The participants thus spoke 'to' rather than 'about' the objects, many drawing analogies from their own journeys and experiences of exile. The resulting video installation engaged memory, imagination, loss, anger and humour, all of which were expressed through these unrehearsed encounters.

The CAP continued to work with the museum seeking to open up areas of shared knowledge in relation to the interpretation of collections. Following the 'Re-kindling Voices' project, CAP members were involved in the establishment of 'Collective Conversations', an ongoing, award-winning way of working recently cited for excellence by a Europe-wide study on inter-cultural dialogue (Wiesand et al. 2008). 'Collective Conversations' are based on notions of creating inter-cultural dialogue through developing an expanded 'community of interpretation', and negotiating the interpretation of the museum's objects with a particular focus on using the museum's large, underused store collections. It is intended to provide opportunities

for interested individuals or mixed groups to actively engage with museum collections, including handling them, telling stories and discussing and debating them with museum staff and others.

At their best, ‘Collective Conversations’ allow for unpredictability and emotion to enter the museum. Interpretations are negotiated through facilitated round-table discussions with other groups (*intra-* and *inter-*cultural dialogue), academics and curators (cf. Faden 2007). A cross section of staff members have been trained in its use as part of their work in developing exhibition themes or projects. The sessions are filmed by museum staff and can be inserted in the museum’s collections database, website, YouTube and ultimately the exhibitions. There are also opportunities for international collaboration with museums in originating countries via video link, so that members of local and international communities can participate in dialogue. After long planning, a dedicated space for ‘Collective Conversations’ opened in 2007. It comprises a fully equipped sound and film studio, dubbed unsurprisingly, the ‘contact zone’ (Clifford 1997; Pratt 1992).

As well as Clifford’s notion of the contact zone, the Manchester Museum’s philosophy of inclusivity, engagement and participation was informed by the (perhaps idealised) ethics of ‘democratic exchange’ (Bauman 2000; Bennett 1998; Bhabha 1994; Fanon 1952; Mauss 1925; Said 1990; Spivak 1985; cf. Appadurai 1986). Thus, the museum’s strategy was intended to be an exercise in practical ethics and everyday democracy, developing partnerships for the co-creation of exhibitions and other processes of co-production related to personal and collective identity, in which ‘master narratives of cultural disappearance and salvage [could] be replaced by stories of revival, remembrance and struggle’ (Clifford 1997, 109). However, until the *Myths about Race* exhibition in 2007, few of the products of these collaborative projects were visible within the museum’s displays. There were many signs of frustration at the perceived lack of pro-active input available to community partners, most notably in discussions between the CAP and museum staff. True collaboration in the sense of shared authority was seen as a limited offer and always controlled by the museum. But these discussions were subtly circumvented by the museum in what now appears to have been a consistent avoidance of conflict, underlying a mixed message of participation. Analysts of global citizenship note that ‘expanding democratic engagement calls for more than invitations to participate’ and call for ‘a push to go beyond the comfort zone of consultation culture’ (Cornwall and Coelho 2007, 8).

*Myths about Race*, as with all the work in which the Manchester Museum had engaged with communities over the years, deftly avoided – or at least did not actively promote – conflicting points of view. The rest of this paper examines what happened to prevent the museum’s collaborative work in moving beyond the ‘comfort zone’ of partnership rhetoric and superficial consultation practices. That is, we address why it failed to move into the ‘contact zone’ of true collaboration and co-production as had been its genuine intention. Museums could and should be, we will argue, spaces of contestation as well as collaboration, in which participants might bring diverse interpretations of participation, democracy and divergent agendas. We think the museum has the potential to be a ‘focalising agent, capable of drawing together diverse, even antagonistic constituencies’ (Hebdige 1993, 272). If this did not happen in *Myths about Race*, the question is, why not?



## Process

In light of these macro- and micro-political contexts, senior Manchester Museum staff wanted an exhibitionary project that would address the museum's own history in connection with the bicentenary. Whereas previous projects had been steered by a group of museum or university staff who then consulted members of local communities and other experts, this group would include individuals from within and outside the museum with equal authority from the outset. The museum staff initially involved had skills in research, design, learning, community engagement or a combination thereof. Among them were the authors of this paper, but because the views expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of the group or that of the Manchester Museum, we have anonymised our contribution and those of others engaged in the process of developing the exhibition.<sup>4</sup> This is *our* interpretation of events.

The composition of the rest of the group was largely facilitated by informal contacts and long-standing relationships formed within the CAP and the university. They included members of staff from the School of Social Sciences and the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust (which holds a Race Relations Archive in the university). Others involved identified themselves in this context principally as an artist, an educator, a collector and a community activist, all of whom had expressed passionate personal views about the racism. In total, the original team comprised 11 individuals of whom five worked for the museum and two from elsewhere in the university. Later, it expanded to include two new members of staff: a curator and a curatorial trainee whose post was funded by the UK Museums Association 'Diversify' scheme in association with the 'Revealing Histories' programme.<sup>5</sup> Most of the museum staff involved were white British; some of the other participants were black British. A white member of museum staff co-ordinated the group's activities. For the most part, senior museum staff orchestrated the constitution of the group, justifying this on the basis of the limited time available for the project. Non-museum personnel were not intended to represent particular communities, but rather were involved because of their own personal and professional experiences.

A specific space within the museum was earmarked for the project. Although small – some 20 × 30 metres – it had considerable architectural and conceptual potential. It was located near a small exhibition that would be the terminus of the 'Revealing Histories' trail in the museum, between the Egyptology and zoology galleries – that is, at the hinge point in the visitor's journey from nature to culture and, perhaps most intriguingly, it was immediately contiguous with the room in which racial groups had originally been displayed within the museum (Alberti 2009). Whatever would go in the space, it would stand in marked contrast to the colonial vestiges that surrounded it. Originally, there was no necessary take-down date, so there was potential to effect permanent change, however small, on the public face of the museum (in fact, it was removed in June 2009). In the beginning, museum staff in the group resisted deeming the project an 'exhibition' on the grounds that this pre-determined the outcome. Rather, they termed it the 'Revealing Histories Space'. Other members of the group and museum staff, however, immediately termed it an exhibition – indicating the overtones of professional jargon even in so simple a term as 'space'. The 'Revealing Histories Space' terminology only survived in the museum's formal records.

The group first met on 22 November 2006 and gathered for a ‘content meeting’ every 3 weeks or so for the following 5 months. Museum staff expressed their ambitious hope – in hindsight, rather, they tried to pre-determine the project – that the group might produce a plan for the space that would render it an ‘induction zone’, a preparation for visitors so that they could begin critically to assess the subtly racist messages within the rest of the museum’s traditional ‘colonialist’ exhibits. They wanted to create ‘a forum – a space from which people can contribute and share their views’.<sup>6</sup> They argued that the museum as an ‘engine of difference’ was especially culpable in the construction of stereotypes of the other (Bennett 1995; Coffee 2008; Gilman 1985). As the group set about compiling a working content brief, however, external members identified the challenge of the paucity of the museum’s own collections in illustrating the history of racism, so often expressed through *lack*, which stemmed from the biases in its past collecting practices (Clifford 1988; Karp and Lavine 1991; Knell 2004; Pearce 1995, 1997). The group agreed that they would need to borrow items from elsewhere. This made it immediately apparent that few within the group would be content to limit the project’s focus to the museum itself. Rather, the consensus of the first meeting was that the wider topic of general racial stereotypes would be more desirable if the museum was to attract the attention of its visitors – and indeed the external members of the content group.

The first meeting alone was an object lesson in the unpredictable character of collaborative work. Although members of the group agreed that they wanted to challenge prejudice, that the space was ‘intended to be a flexible forum space for provocation, discussion and contemplation’, and that they wanted ‘visitors to think about the role of the museum in constructing racial stereotypes’ – there was little agreement otherwise.<sup>7</sup> These painfully crafted briefs were the only common ground precisely because they did not delimit the project. External members of the group were sceptical that they would genuinely play a part in object selection, and that staff could and would challenge the institutional authority of their own museum. They were concerned that such a small-scale exhibition would do little to change the wider biases they perceived in the museum’s older galleries, and frustrated at the glacial rate of change of the permanent exhibitions.

Despite efforts by some of the museum staff to develop a remit before moving on to how to realise it, the conversation immediately and resolutely focussed on object selection. These discussions on what would go in the space, which were stimulating at first, became more heated as the weeks went past. With little agreement even on the themes of the project, a public meeting for broader consultation (which was becoming common practice for the Manchester Museum’s exhibition processes) was repeatedly postponed until it was cancelled altogether on the grounds that, at such a late stage, there would be little chance of genuinely incorporating substantive suggestions. Meanwhile, external members of the group were becoming increasingly frustrated with the project.

In retrospect, museum staff deftly avoided conflict, subtly by-passing differences of opinion and effectively overriding group members’ passion and anger. Topics or objects that museum staff felt did not fit the remit of the exhibition were subtly, or otherwise, relegated to subjects for later development of the space, to content input for permanent gallery redevelopment or even as subjects of books to be sold in conjunction with the exhibition. External members of the group understandably

resented the unspoken communication between museum staff around the table, and began to eschew meetings, contributing only by email or opting out altogether.

Were the museum staff members blind to a form of institutionalised racism in their responses? This uncomfortable issue crystallised around one of the exhibition's themes, in particular, the black history of Egypt. The reasons museum staff proffered for rejecting one external member's idea for illustrating this theme were based primarily on design concerns, but the underlying issue was the disagreement over the centrality of the topic to the project. There was also a discomfort with the aesthetics of the item in question, a laminated timeline. The group member wanted the content of the timeline to form the narrative of the exhibition, while museum staff thought this would overly dominate the space. In the end, the timeline was displayed, but as an object in itself rather than for its content – it was exhibited in a vitrine, partially rolled up, rather than blown up on the wall.<sup>8</sup> The extent to which this comprised or stemmed from institutionalised racism was foregrounded later in the public debate discussed below, but shortly after the exhibition was launched the contributor removed this item for educational use elsewhere, asking pointedly of the exhibition, 'Whose story is it?' In avoiding conflict, a compromise was reached that satisfied no one.

This was not the only dissenting voice on the *Myths about Race* planning group. Another participant, a long-standing member of the CAP, became frustrated because he was unable to express the strength of his feelings about slavery and its legacies. The team's cool discussions of racism in a historical, abstract sense arguably overruled his passion. Increasingly frustrated, the individual took offence at a difference of interpretation of a term used informally in conversation and focused his anger on that, withdrawing from the project planning process. Two museum staff members said they felt 'privileged' to work in the museum: *they* meant they were lucky, while *he* heard them boasting. We indicated earlier that words may be heard in unintended ways (Cornwall 2004), and this was a vivid example. In particular, Sara Ahmed questions the benefit of ascribing privilege in such a context:

Whether learning to see the mark of privilege involves unlearning that privilege? What are we learning when we learn to see privilege? ... We cannot simply unlearn privilege when the cultures in which learning takes place are shaped by privilege. ... We need to consider the intimacy between privilege and the work we do, even in the work we do *on* privilege. (Ahmed 2004, 36, 40, 55)

This revealing word sparked an emotional response to the museum's authority over what was to be included or left out of the *Myths about Race* exhibition. Nevertheless, the individual later agreed to be involved again after accepting the museum staff members' apologies – ultimately becoming one of the most prolific members of the group.

Three months into the process a way of working emerged in which different members championed particular themes and objects. It became increasingly clear, however, that the museum was unlikely to relinquish its veto on object selection, even though it was never actually deployed. In March, the group finally agreed on a title – *Revealing Histories: Myths about Race*.<sup>9</sup> With 4 months to go before the exhibition launch, any semblance of genuine co-production was abandoned, and the museum took over. This shift was recorded in a carefully worded minute:

Decision making: The team acknowledged that as the project moves closer to realisation, decisions will need to be made not only on principle, but also in light of pragmatic concerns such as the shape of the space, and the accessibility of the proposed objects/text/images.<sup>10</sup>

There had been a 'delivery team' shadowing the content group to discuss budgets and other technicalities (of which participants were aware), and in April 2007 it took over the management of the project. The content team chair continued to liaise closely with external members of the group – especially those who had agreed to author text in the exhibition – but they were now involved in a consultative and advisory capacity. In the final weeks, it was museum employees who put the exhibition together. Pragmatics overtook idealism.

### **Product**

Of the many possible themes within the exhibition – framed as 'stereotypes to dispel' – four were selected and three were eventually displayed. The space and its display mechanisms were built to be flexible, so that the exhibition could be adapted later to include other short-listed objects or themes with ease (after 2007). This made it more acceptable to narrow the scope from global prejudices to concentrate on the former British Empire, particularly the African Diaspora, and on the Transatlantic slave trade (still a vast remit) – topics the group considered appropriate in the context of the 2007 bicentenary. At the time, the group intended that the space would subsequently be adapted to examine the role of empire, for example, or even other forms of prejudice.<sup>11</sup>

Visitors were enticed into the exhibition with electronic boards whose mobile lettering asked the core questions of the project, including 'Are Museums Racist?' and 'Why do some people think the colour of their skin makes them better than others?' The first theme encountered was 'Black Egypt', in which the team hoped to provoke visitors to reflect on the ethnicity of the Ancient Egyptians, so often portrayed in European media as Anglo-Saxon. Items included a poster advertising *Cleopatra* (Mankiewicz 1963) on loan from the British Film Institute; a vase from the Manchester Museum's collection that the archaeologist Flinders Petrie had labelled 'tomb of new race', and the controversial timeline mentioned above. Lying next on the visitors' route (but first in the conceptual arrangement) was the 'Myth of Race' theme, which focussed on the construction of 'primitives' and racial hierarchies. Objects included a boomerang; Edwardian anthropological photographs (the individuals in which were named in the accompanying text); and a chart of crania from primates through the 'lesser' races to Europeans compiled by the Manchester man-midwife, collector and virulent racist, Charles White (Figure 1). Finally, and most prominently, was evidence of local efforts to combat racism and challenge racist stereotypes (Figure 2), including an abolitionist token; a signed copy of Paul Robeson's *Here I Stand* from his visit to Manchester (Robeson 1957), and ephemera from the 1945 Pan-African Congress held in Manchester, on loan from the Working Class Movement Library in Salford.

Whereas museums traditionally silence the work that goes into exhibitions (Conaty 2003; Macdonald 1998), those who have experienced and analysed collaborative exhibits promote the 'primacy of process' (Ames 2003; Shelton 2003). In *Myths about Race*, the team, as far as possible, sought to render the process

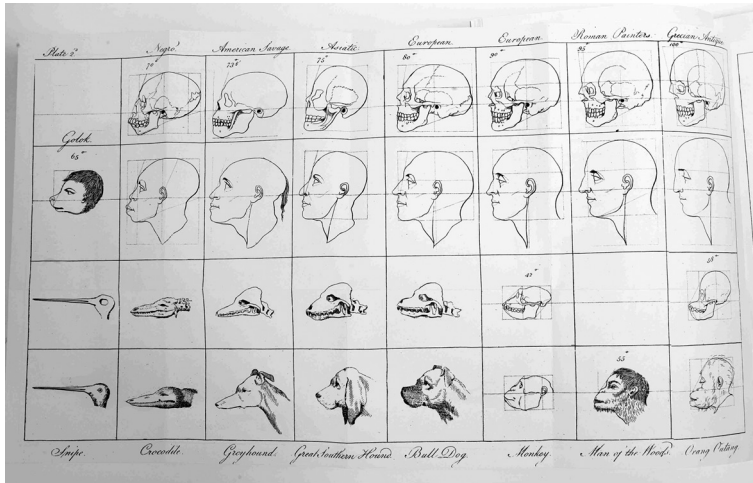


Figure 1. Fold-out from Charles White, *An account of the regular gradation in man, and in different animals and vegetables* (London: Dilly, 1799). Courtesy of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester Special Collections; photograph by Stephen Devine.

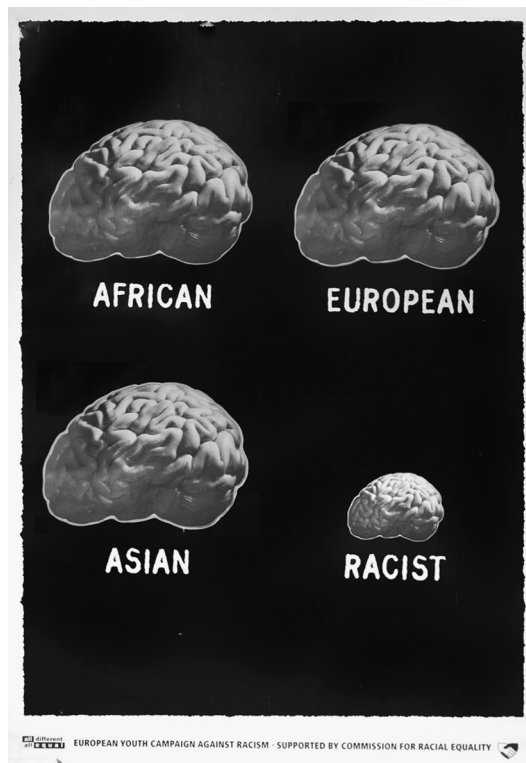


Figure 2. European Youth Campaign against Racism, 'Brain of a racist' poster, c. 1990. Copyright the Commission for Equality and Human Rights known as the Equality and Human Rights Commission (the EHRC); photograph by Stephen Devine.

transparent in the end product. To their disappointment, the budget ruled out multimedia demonstrations of the object selection process.<sup>12</sup> Instead, visitors could browse a folder with records of all the meetings of the team, together with further details of the objects, floor plans and other working documents. More significantly, the exhibition was avowedly multi-vocal (cf. Phillips 2003). To indicate the collaborative nature of the exhibition, texts were written in first person and concentrated not on formal descriptions but upon the affective significance of the object. They were signed throughout with first names only and eschewed formal roles in favour of the team's interest in the subject: one member was 'interested in the history of museums', while another wanted 'to challenge the legacies of colonialism'.<sup>13</sup>

Crucially, the texts did not identify whether the authors were from within the museum or not (although eagle-eyed visitors were able to decode this from the acknowledgements panel). For several of the objects, multiple panels gave different – but not overtly conflicting – interpretations of the item. Once again, however, the process fell short of genuine co-production. Heavy editing was involved for all texts, whether authored within or beyond the museum. Although this was intended to ensure the entries met the desired word length and reading age, and the original 'author' always agreed the final version, this, in effect, imposed the museum's voice – or at least its tone – on individuals' words.

On 24 August 2007, on time and under budget, *Revealing Histories: Myths about Race* was quietly opened (Figure 3), and 5 days later the museum hosted a private viewing for the participants, the CAP and various others. It began with *This Accursed Thing*, a piece of museum theatre commissioned for the 2007 bicentenary, followed by the usual words and thanks from senior museum staff. Content team participants later observed that no one from outside the museum spoke formally.<sup>14</sup> The team member who had advocated the timeline so passionately attended for a few minutes at the beginning, but had to depart for another engagement before the speeches. Rather, he was able to voice his feelings on the project in another forum,



Figure 3. *Myths about Race*, Manchester Museum, August 2007. Courtesy of the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester; photograph by Stephen Devine.

a debate at the museum on 4 October 2007. At this heated, open meeting held to discuss, 'Are Museums Racist?' he explained:

It meant a lot to me, getting involved in this project. I wanted to see that there's some kind of change in what was going on [in museums], some change in an institution which is racist. I said to these guys that I'm here to see that they don't get back on the same conveyor belt and go along with the same crap. And I'm very disappointed with the exhibition. For one thing, the story is supposed to be about people's African ancestry, but if it is, pieces have been put in or left out, have been decided on [by the museum], so we're still being controlled. I'm passionate about this project – I came into this thing because the children who come to this museum... whether they're European, African or Asian, they're all learning the rubbish. They come into this museum and learn about light-skinned ancient Egyptians, which is impossible. It tells the children 'this is who you are' – they are mis-educated.<sup>15</sup>

A member of the CAP who had not been directly involved with the exhibition afterwards echoed his sentiment, and commented on what he saw as institutional racism in the museum's reaction at the debate:

The process is the bit we're interested in, not the product. A spear, a piece of pottery, it doesn't matter – it's the people here who are making the decisions – they're the ones we can claim are racist.<sup>16</sup>

The product in question, the *Myths about Race* exhibition, was effective in its aims to provoke museum visitors to consider racial stereotypes and residual racism in British public culture. Written feedback was plentiful and lively. One visitor considered it 'an emotional reminder that injustice goes on – and we play a part in it'; another simply noted that 'it makes me want to talk to someone about it'. Many response cards simply carried variations on the message, 'stop racism!'<sup>17</sup> Yet, did the *process* bear traces of institutional racism? By relying on the twin crutches of academia and professionalism, had the museum distanced itself from these harsh realities of racism in the here-and-now? Was it still complicit? In the debate, the CAP member cited above added:

I'm not an academic, but sometimes my problem is with academia: analysis usually leads to paralysis. It's like people who don't talk about racism but the symptoms of racism. Racism is about human beings – it's not about analysing it in an exhibition. It's the feelings we have inside, the hatred, the palpable feelings – that's the racism I'm interested in.<sup>18</sup>

The debate provoked many questions. Were museum staff fooling themselves in thinking they were operating outside the framework of historical prejudices? Did they exhibit 'contradictory consciousness' – enacting racist practices while trying to change them (Gramsci 1929–1935; Hall 1986)? Was there an element of collusion played out through these power relationships? The way these relations are embodied in the spaces of the museum needs to be engaged with and analysed if this perpetuation is to be arrested, and if the museum is to promote participatory democracy (Gaventa 2004).

It is perhaps ironic that the potential perpetuation of prejudice may stem from museum professionals' understandable urge to achieve compromise and avoid conflict. Over the years of the Manchester Museum's engagement with local neighbourhoods there have been many exchanges with community members in which the institution attempted to control heightened emotions and to divert anger. When faced with resentment the museum conceals any fear, rather than owning up to it,

embracing it and working *with* it. Instead, staff meet anger with cool, managerial or academic responses. Perhaps something more honest and human is required of museums. At the 'Are Museums Racist?' event, a CAP member argued:

We're here to challenge and I fear that others may not challenge us back. It's not for you to just listen to us being angry and *just* listen. The point is the dialogue. The point is that we could be totally wrong. I don't personally believe I am wrong – but I am willing to listen to somebody who totally disagrees with me.<sup>19</sup>

In this sense, staff, as individuals, could have openly disagreed with external members of the team, rather than passing glances of exasperation around the table, diverting anger and making decisions elsewhere among themselves. Yet, how can divergence be facilitated in museums in the realm of 'professional expertise' and conflict avoidance? Timothy Luke writes, 'Amid . . . intense social, political, and cultural anxieties, it is no surprise that museums today are a crossroads of cultural conflict, dissent, and struggle . . . these institutions must serve as crucibles of conceptual, ethical, and aesthetic confrontation [but] too many museum boards, curators and patrons . . . see clash as always and everywhere a bad thing' (2006, 22).

Even if museums were to become aware of their own institutionalised prejudices and are willing to engage with conflict, how do they overcome participants' lack of confidence when faced with institutional power – people who have spent their lives on the receiving end of prejudice and may have so internalised discourses of discrimination that they are barely able to imagine themselves as actors, let alone agents (Freire 1972)? 'Exercising voice in such a setting requires more than having the nerve and the skills to speak', observes Cornwall, whose argument is once again redolent of the experiences of those involved in *Myths about Race*: 'Resisting discursive closure, reframing what counts as knowledge and articulating alternatives, especially in the face of apparently incommensurable knowledge systems, requires more than simply seeking to allow everyone to speak and asserting the need to listen' (Cornwall 2004, 84).

### **Conclusion: radical trust in the museum**

The Manchester Museum's director, Nick Merriman, later reflected that *Revealing Histories* 'was probably the closest we've got to authentic co-production, but to be honest we found it harder than we thought. We were surprised by how passionate people are', he admitted, 'it's difficult to get it right and to manage expectations' (Mulhearn 2008, 24). In *Myths about Race* his staff underestimated the emotional complexity of the issues for all involved and offered the illusion that everything was negotiable in the project. Yet, they knew there would always be institutional limits of time, space, budget and an academic storyline in place, so that ultimately the external participants were simply being asked to help 'illustrate' the existing story through their choice of objects and limited personal narrative. Although the exhibition was delivered successfully and was well received, the intended *co-production* was not realised – the term itself was never unpacked. The existing limitations, if they were indeed immutable, were not made clear to the community 'partners'. This was because the institution, optimistically and in good faith, wanted to present a blank page for the whole team to create collaboratively together. The 'offer' was unclear because the full ramifications of co-production in practice were not sufficiently



considered. There was considerable goodwill all round at the beginning of the project, but the limitations of the process were suppressed.

Challenges to the museum's authority only fully crystallised after *Myths about Race*. The community and non-museum university 'partners' had never really been partners, and contrary to the museum's original intention, authority was not genuinely shared. Like many other museum professionals, the staff members avoided confronting the issues concealed behind appeals to pragmatism and time constraints, thus refusing to relinquish institutional authority. If this was tantamount to institutionalised racism it was unintentional, stemming largely from this commendable urge for consensus. As we have indicated, however, observers and even some participants did discern the legacies of prejudice in the *Myths about Race* process. Perhaps most ironically of all, in a project about prejudice the museum encountered its own.

Is it enough to face up to prejudice and its legacies in museum practice as we seek to do now, or to host open and seemingly self-critical debates on museums and racism as we did then? Is it possible that, by facing their colonialist past and its consequences, museums can find themselves indulging in what Ahmed calls 'a fantasy of transcendence', imagining that 'if we say we are racists, then we are not racists, as racists do not know they are racists' (2004, 1)? Is this merely the 'politics of declaration, in which institutions, as well as individuals, "admit" to forms of bad practice in which the "admission" itself becomes seen as good practice' (Ahmed 2004, 3) – that is, 'non-performative' racism? As Ahmed suggests, does racism structure the institutional space (the university or the museum) from which we make our critique, and even the very terms with which we make it in this paper? Participation does not eliminate a power differential that may be inextricably bound with race, and museums may marginalise their partners if they do not acknowledge this. 'Instead of trying to erase this past by the magic of generous recasting', as Price argues, museums 'should be making people aware of all that silently conditions their perceptions' (Price 2007, 174).

By seeking to avoid conflict during *Myths about Race*, the museum suppressed the politics of the process and thereby continued to exercise its cultural authority (Honig 1993), effectively ensuring those uneasy perceptions remained hidden from view. Participants' disillusionment was the unsurprising consequence of this avoidance, which led to a breakdown of the very trust that the project was intended to promote. The so-called 'shared space' of the museum remains deeply political, and in reviewing the years of community engagement at the Manchester Museum we begin to understand how such spaces of power operate. However implicitly and unintentionally, certain people and groups were always silenced or excluded (Gaventa 2006). We are keenly aware that even in writing this paper we have perpetuated this imbalance – exclusionary practices described and analysed in an exclusive academic context by two white museum professionals. We have made it clear, however, that this is our own version of events and we have not attempted to present a consensual account. We hope that the benefits our reflections may bring will outbalance the disadvantages of this disparity. Furthermore, accounts by others involved have been made public in other forums.<sup>20</sup>

Participants in an ethico-political dialogue are rarely equal, and almost never equally represented in the final consensus. Insofar as this dialogue is already projected towards some pre-determined end – whether justice, rationality or a preset

notion of an exhibition – the field of possibilities is always delimited and certain outcomes favoured (Chakrabarty 1995). One of the participants invariably ‘knows better’ than the other, whose world view, in turn, must be modified or ‘improved’ in the reaching of consensus. The heterogeneity of thought, Lyotard argued, can only ever be preserved through the refusal of unanimity and the search for radical ‘discensus’ (Gandhi 1998, 28). While working towards a desired end, within cultural institutions that are almost entirely funded in their public sphere on the basis of ‘projects’ with limited timescales and pre-defined outcomes, there is little room for heterogeneity of thought and certainly the avoidance of any ‘discensus’ that would become an obstacle in the production of the outcomes desired. It is this imposition of the desire for outcomes, however, that creates its own ‘exclusions’ and, as in the case of the *Myths about Race* project, the drive for consensus became exclusionary (cf. Harvey 1993). In hindsight, it is unsurprising that the contentious subject of the exhibition would provoke powerful and conflicting feelings. Museum staff should not be surprised when difficult issues provoke argument. Rather than strive for compromise, perhaps they should embrace discensus.

For these encounters are also spaces of possibility, in which power can take a more productive and positive form. Participation in museums can be dynamic and surprising. What is called for is a *radical trust* in which the museum cannot control the outcome. There may be unanticipated consequences in relinquishing authority in this way but, as we have seen, there are unanticipated consequences even when the museum does not. Despite the original emphasis on process in *Myths about Race*, the Manchester Museum continued to privilege the product. It is evident that the museum shared its authority to a certain extent, although it is unlikely that the attempts to co-produce will be the principal take-home for visitors, who were more interested in its message (which is of course important and ‘worthy’). It may be concluded that exhibitions are not suitable outcomes for projects like this, yet to exclude exhibitions would be to retreat from the most public terrain of contestation the museum has to offer and, furthermore, to deny participant citizens the right to negotiate the authority with which exhibitions are created. Museums may therefore benefit from setting out not to develop a particular outcome, but rather a set of relations and skills. Certainly the skills developed by all involved in *Myths about Race* will have lasting value.

As we indicated at the outset, the radically trusting museum has the potential to be part of the ‘participatory sphere’ alongside other ‘spaces for *creating* citizenship’ (Cornwall and Coelho 2007, 8). We would echo Yuval-Davis’s call for ‘dialogues that give recognition to the specific positionings of those who participate in them’ (1999, 7). Radical trust may help museums to become more aware of their legacies of prejudice, and *unlearn* them in order to openly and honestly negotiate knowledge and power with others in the future within a spirit of genuine reciprocity (Spivak 1985). Potentially, this kind of work offers the opportunity for museums to help generate ‘third spaces’ where different groups equally unfamiliar with the environs can share experiences and participate on equitable terms. As Yudhishtir Raj Isar reflects, inter-cultural dialogue involves ‘building encounters between individuals and groups that oblige each of them to mobilise the basic characteristics, symbols and myths of their respective cultures on a shared terrain that is new to each and belongs to no one alone’ (Isar 2006, 22). It is not time to become dispirited by the

difficulties of participatory democracy in museums, but to try again, and again, despite the difficulties – in fact, because of them.

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### **Notes**

1. Revealing Histories Space Content Team Meeting Minutes (held in the Manchester Museum Central Archive, hereafter 'RHS'), 22 November 2006, p. 4.
2. See [www.direct.gov.uk/en/slavery/DG\\_065915](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/slavery/DG_065915) and [www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated](http://www.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated).
3. As reported by Sue McAlpine, Hackney Museum, at the UK Museums Association conference discussion, 'Can Museums Really Co-Create Everything With the Public?', 7 October 2008, Liverpool.
4. All quotes from individuals are either from minutes of the exhibition project meetings or transcripts from recorded (filmed) public forum events that formed part of the project. They are, therefore, part of the public record held by the Manchester Museum.
5. These positions are for 2 years, half time with a museum (or museums) and half-time training provided by an accredited museum studies programme, in this case provided by the Centre for Museology at the University of the Manchester. Once appointed, holders of Diversify traineeships are only identified as trainees, with no reference to the nature of the funding. We only mention it here because of its obvious relevance to the topic at hand. The association describes the bursaries thus: 'People from ethnic minorities are under-represented in the museum and gallery workforce. The Museums Association Diversify scheme offers training opportunities to prepare people of African, Caribbean, Asian or Chinese descent for work in UK museums and galleries'. See [www.museumsassociation.org/diversify](http://www.museumsassociation.org/diversify).
6. RHS, 22 November 2006, p. 2.
7. RHS, 14 December 2006, p. 1.
8. The final terse minute regarding this debate read 'The creator of the timeline to be informed that we are using it'. *Myths about Race* Meeting Minutes (held in the Manchester Museum Central Archive, hereafter 'MAR'), 17 July 2007, p. 1.
9. RHS, 9 March 2007, p. 1. This title was chosen over 'Talking about Race' because of the importance of challenging racists notions, and in spite of reservations about the anachronism of labelling historical scientific ideas, however unpalatable, as 'myths'.
10. RHS, 9 March 2007, p. 1; see MAR, 8 June–8 August 2007.
11. RHS, 10 January 2007. In June 2009 the exhibition was taken down, and the space was converted into an introduction to Darwinism and the zoology galleries. The old and new topics have considerable overlap – see for example Desmond and Moore (2009) and Scott (2007).
12. RHS, 14 December 2006.
13. *Revealing Histories: Myths about Race* information pack, Manchester Museum Exhibition Archive, p. 2, 8.
14. *Myths about Race* evaluation workshop notes, 15 January 2008, ed. Nadine Andrews, Manchester Museum Exhibition Archive.
15. 'Are Museums Racist?', 4 October 2007, AV recording, Manchester Museum, available at [www.revealinghistories.org.uk/are-museums-and-galleries-racist](http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/are-museums-and-galleries-racist) (hereafter 'AMR').
16. AMR.

17. *Revealing Histories: Myths about Race* ‘Tell us what you think’ cards, September 2007, Manchester Museum Exhibition Archive.
18. AMR.
19. AMR.
20. In the AMR recoding, for example.

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